

Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

Episode 64: Zach Obront

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak, and live all things disruption. Our guest today is Zach Obront, the co-founder of [Book in a Box](#), a company that helps entrepreneurs and innovators turn their ideas into a book.

Whitney: Zach, thank you so much for being with us today.

Zach: Yeah. I'm excited to be here.

Whitney: You did something really interesting right out of college. You did a program called [The Foundation Year Program Chronological Study of Great Books](#). Could you tell us a little bit about that program? What you did with that?

Zach: We're going way back. That was actually during college. So that was, that was-

Whitney: Oh.

Zach: ... for my freshman year of college. There was this school in Canada called, called King's College. And basically what they offered was rather than doing a normal freshman year, you take one class that's incredibly time consuming. And starts way at the beginning of ancient Mesopotamia, and ancient Egypt, and just kind of chronologically moves through the greatest books in history from start to finish. Uh, kind of tackling some from more of a historical perspective, some were philosophical, uh, some were literature based, kind of all over the place. Focusing on that, that flow through history as opposed to isolating things by subject. So I, I was ready to go kind of do this program to prepare for my ... for an MBA, and I heard about this and got too excited, so I put the whole, the whole MBA thing on pause, and, and went over to Nova Scotia where it's based and spent the year doing that.

Whitney: You do that your freshman year in college, it's life changing it sounds like. Um, and then you study Economics, Political Science, Philosophy, the University of Western Ontario, and then you, you graduate from college, and you start a company, and tell us what it is. Because everything that ... Based on what you just said, when everybody hears what you did with this company, they're gonna be very surprised. So, what did you do with this company?

Zach: I'm not sure which one you're talking about.

Whitney: It's Handy Monkey. Handy Monkey.

Zach: Okay. Yes, yes. 'Cause, 'cause in between there, weirdly, I, uh ... While I was in, in college, I started a high school. And that was really the first real business I had started. Straight, straight out of college, I don't ... Don't ask me why, so ... (laughs) Or you can ask me why, but, uh, it definitely seems like a silly decision in retrospect, but yeah. I

ended up starting a mold removal company. Um, and that's, that's what we did. We did mold restoration, and water damage repair, and all kinds of, all kinds of boring stuff.

Whitney: Well, I don't know that it's a silly idea, it's just that it's, it's ... I'm having ... My brain's having, especially now that you just told me you started a high school, and my brain's having a hard time getting from Nietzsche to mold. And so, do you remember, like, where ...

Zach: Sure.

Whitney: What, what, what calculus was happening in your head?

Zach: Basically what happened was as I learned more about the way the internet and, and kind of a new era of marketing was disrupting industries, what kept surfacing over and over was that the industries that would benefit most from understanding how to leverage SEO, and, and, uh, Pay Per Click advertising, and all these things that were relatively ... Not new at the time, but weren't completely adopted, were all these boring old industries. And so, my first thought I was, I was working with a business partner at the time, which was a friend of mine.

And we were like, "Well, let's, let's just try and go help all these businesses do this stuff properly 'cause it's, it's really frustrating that you can't find a mold removal company in Toronto and we have this kind of problem." Despite there being so many of them because they don't know how to use the internet at all. And so we went out to them and said, "Hey, listen. We can help you out with this. Happy to, to kind of get you set up and, and do some of the work to build that foundation. And over and over we heard the same response. It was like, "Oh, the internet. I tried that once, I, I don't think it works." And so, (laughs) we would get so frustrated.

And so eventually what we decided was the only way we were gonna be able to kind of make that change in that industry, is just to do it end to end, and show them that the Internet works, and therefore, we can generate leads, and therefore, we can build a team, and therefore, we can solve the actual problem." We can't just come in and solve the slice that they're doing incorrectly.

So, so that was Handy Monkey. We kinda got lured in step-by-step until next thing we knew we were not just helping on the front end of, of helping them do the marketing side of things, but really running this full mold, mold removal and water restoration business end to end. And so, did that for about eight months until it was actually really working, and then finally, I was able to take a breath and say, "Why the hell am I doing this?" (laughing) And I ... 'Cause I, I tend to get caught up in problems that, like, when there's no solution, I'm just focused on finding a the solution as opposed to stepping back and, and questioning, especially at that age. Um, so, so I kinda put my head down and ran through a wall for eight months until finally we got there. And then I said, "Ooh, this is horrible."

And so my, my business partner was excited, being like, "We can expand to new cities, we can do this and that." And I was like, "Whoa, any growth, anymore of this does not sound fun to me." So we made a deal where he, he kind of bought me out and, and took over the business, and, uh, I decided I will not be doing any mold removal companies going forward.

Whitney: That's fascinating. But it was a great tutorial for you, right?

Zach: Yeah. I mean-

Whitney: A great tutorial.

Zach: I, I learned a lot, and I think I got the chase of business just for the point of it being successful out of my system really, really quickly because I kinda hit the, hit the boredom and, and kind of emptiness of that really fast, which I think set me up well for thinking about things moving forward from there.

Whitney: That's fascinating that you just said that. I think it's a really important point is that, um, this idea of realizing... Some people might like building a business just because they enjoy building the business per se, but what you're saying is that you need to build a business, for you anyway, and probably for most people, around something that's really interesting to you.

Zach: I think I might be the most extreme end of the spectrum of, like, I just love the fun of actually building anything. But what comes with that is, like, once it's built, then you will have no interest in it. If someone's personal goal to spend a lot of time building, experimenting with new things, then finding a way to get out of them, then that, that might be viable. For me, as someone who wanted to be involved in something over a longer term, and build something bigger, there was no way I was ever gonna do that. It's something that if it didn't keep me motivated and excited, uh, once it was already built, and that, that high of getting, getting started was, was out of the way.

Whitney: Which brings us to your current business. Uh, [Book in a Box](#).

Zach: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: Uh, that one's a little bit more logical when I look at your background of studying great books, and studying political science and philosophy, how did [Book in a Box](#) come about?

Zach: So, interestingly, although it, it definitely, um, has ended up in a place that is far more inspiring to me, um, it was the same thing of, of really being frustrated by a problem and just having getting sucked into solving it step-by-step. So I was, I was working with, with my business partner, [Tucker](#), uh, kind of on and off in a, in a kind of, like, experimental way. And we were both just so frustrated with the way that things operated in the publishing industry. Things that, that as self publishing grew, things had kind of fragmented, all the doors had opened, but the right services and support for authors

hadn't really evolved. And so, typical to my fashion at (laughs) the time, I, uh, I was like, "Oh, let's just solve every single possible problem. So we'll start a publishing company, and a design company, and an author platform building company, and, uh, book marketing company, and, uh, editing. And we'll just do all of it and then everyone will have every solution they need." Um, and Tucker, wisely, did not think that that was the best way to approach it, but, uh, in order to figure out which of those things really, uh, made the most sense as a business, and inspired us the most, our plan was, let's, let's work with a bunch of authors in slightly different capacities, whether it's consulting, or really doing the actual service work. Um, and, and see how those pieces come together and where we wanna focus more attention. So again, it was just being drawn to this frustration of a broken system that wasn't working well. Um ...

Whitney: How did you discover in the first place, though, that it was broken? I mean, what were you doing? 'Cause, I mean, you were focusing on mold, um, how did you discover that there ... the book writing process was broken? Were you thinking about writing a book? So how'd it ... ? Walk us through-

Zach: No, no.

Whitney: ... how you figured out this was problem.

Zach: Yeah. So, so there were, there were a few, a few years in between those two things. Tucker had been very involved in publishing for a long time. So when he, he published his first two books through traditional publisher, uh, for his third book, he said, "Hey, the math doesn't work here. I could ... ", kind of before the era of self-publishing, "I could start a publishing a company just to publish my own book. And the math would work out far better. Then I'd have more freedom, more flexibility. Not have to pay a publisher as much." Like, none of ... That, that it made more sense to do it himself. So he had done that. And then in the years after that, as he had kind of solved all those problems, and, and then done it publicly, a lot of authors were coming to him saying, "Hey, saw you, saw you did this, uh, how can I work out a similar deal?"

Or, "How can I do this variant of that problem?", or, or, "How ... " Just having kind of miscellaneous questions around publishing. And so, Tucker and I had started, had started kind of working together just to...as I was supporting the kind of one-off projects that were coming to him in order to, uh, in order to solve whatever publishing problems these authors were having. And so it went from kind of a part-time let's experiment with this kind of thing, to wow, there's a lot of people who are frustrated with the way that things are right now. And, and I can see a solution through a lot of those problems. So it, it didn't, it wasn't like an, an analysis of any sort, it was again, just, just kind of getting sucked in and feeling that frustration that everyone else (laughing) was experiencing.

Whitney: So experimenting. So you had, your, your, co-founder, Tucker, he had publ- he, he had actually created a publishing company on his own 'cause he was the ... It ... This was his third book, and he said, "I'm gonna publish this on my own so that I can retain a lot more of the pro- the profits." And it sounds like he had enough of a platform that he could do that. I mean, I think, is that correct?

Zach: Yeah, exactly. He'd ... I mean, his first two books had sold accumulative, I think, 1.5 million, or 2 million, copies at that point. So he was, he was doing very well and, and knew that the third book would be a success.

Whitney: Right. Okay. So that's an important, um, aspect of it, 'cause I think sometimes people will say, "I'm going to do this on my own." And they can't do it on their own because they have no way to actually ... They need the distribution, and he had the distribution, is what you're saying?

Zach: Yeah. I, I, I would, I would question that, that, that getting a publisher when you don't have any platform, is that helpful in terms of distribution? Um, that, that I think, like, truthfully, people kind of need to do it on their own no matter what, but yes, in his case, he had, he had already built that platform and he was very well set up. He literally just needed the logistical specifics of publishing. So it was very easy for him to replicate that on his own.

Whitney: So that was one problem that people were coming to you all to solve is, how do I actually publish the book? And you didn't decide to create [Book in a Box](#) immediately. What was another one or two problems that people were coming to you? These pieces of this publishing puzzle that you started to solve?

Zach: Yeah. So that's a great question. So, I mean the biggest one that we were seeing a lot of was, was what you just brought up. Authors who didn't have any platform built yet. Didn't have an audience. And said, "I'm willing to put in the work, and slow and steady build towards this, but I don't know where to start. How do I, how do I start to grow that audience in advance of a book?" And then a lot of the other little logistical pieces of design, um, how to r- run effective book launches, uh, editing of books, positioning of books. Really, like, every single piece that went into the process start to finish, we were seeing, it doesn't make sense to do that slice on its own as, as a solution.

We were coming in and trying to do these slices on their own, and the problem with that for books is that if you look at a book usually you're going to judge it by its, by like the lowest common denominator. Right? If it's, if it's a great book but it's horribly designed and, and printed badly, you're going to think it looks amateur. If it's beautifully designed but it's not, doesn't have any valuable ideas in it, well then who wants to read that? And even if the ideas are good if it's badly written you're going to judge it by that.

So, any gap is going to make the book as a whole not respected, and the problem with coming in with one slice is that we could do that slice really well, but we didn't really have the ability to get the author all the way to the result that really mattered to them. All we could do was tick the box of, of what they expected from us.

And so this was kind of the thinking when we, when we did the first [Book in a Box](#) book was, all right, we're able to work with someone across all of these things, starting before they even start, with just the idea, and helping them formulate the idea in the right way, and help them write the book and help them write the book and help them publish it and market it. And we've got this control through the whole thing that we can really

take responsibility for them accomplishing the big picture goals that they have, instead of just trying to do the thing that they hired us to do.

We started that about half way through that experimentation phase, and immediately we thought, wow, this is, this is easier for us, more fun for us, more meaningful to have final books that we worked on start to finish. It was everything that we were most excited about. What that actually looked like as we worked with authors, uh, was, was that what we found was that many of the most successful people that talked to us about writing books wouldn't do it because they were too busy. And their problem was they both had too much going on in their lives so they couldn't sit down and write the entire book themselves, but if they hired a ghost writer, the book wasn't really authentically theirs, and they felt like the, their message was going to get lost in translation.

And so our goal was how do we balance things in a way that keeps their message 100% theirs but lowers the time commitment.

And after some experimentation, what that ended up looking like was, whereas a ghost writer typically, to the extent that they'll really interview you for the book, they'll ask a ton of questions, they'll try to learn everything you know, and then they'll say, "Great, I'm going to go off and write the book on Whitney's behalf."

Whereas what, what we found is when they're asking all those questions, they're putting it all into their heads and then they're doing the creative work, and if we could work together with an author to really structure and break down the entire logic and the entire framework of the entire, of the whole book, then when we interviewed them rather than just being Whitney teaching me so I can go off and write, it's Whitney dictating every idea in the book in her words in the right order from start to finish, and of course I'm still going to add a lot of creative input to it, but I've got the, I've got your ideas in your words in the right order, transcribed on the page as a starting point.

And so that's exactly what we do. We, we work together and we work really slow through the outline phase to break down for each chapter, what's every point we want to make, what's every story we want to tell, what's every example we want to give, and once we've done all the thinking and we have the entire logical flow of the book from start to finish, only then do we start the interviews. And so we sit down with the author and talk them through, uh, tell me this story, and now explain why that matters and give me this point, and transcribe that whole set of interviews.

And once that's done what we have is usually a full book's length of text that's the author speaking out the whole book.

Whitney: It's in their words. It's in their words.

Zach: In their words. That's it, and so, so from there it's much more of like an editing or like a translation job, as opposed to a writing from scratch job and injecting all of our own beliefs and losing theirs. And so we do, we do all that and then, again, like I, like I mentioned before, from there, all the other pieces that are necessary as well. So

publishing, and marketing and kind of doing everything end to end so that the author can just be the idea person.

Whitney: Okay, so I actually have a ton of questions, cause I just published a book, so what kinds of, uh, what kinds of people typically end up coming to you? Is it, I mean the thing I'm thinking to myself is a person who's for example, a CEO, who wants to write a book and doesn't have time, but they want it to be in their own words. Do you get lots of CEOs that come to you?

Zach: Yeah, a lot. So, so the people who we tend to work with, it's, there's a few criteria. They have to, generally it's books that are non- they're all nonfiction books, but almost all nonfiction books where the person is a subject matter expert sharing what they know really well. Right? Like this only works well if the, if the author knows it so deeply that they can talk intelligently off the cuff, otherwise they might as well be, be typing it.

And then it's also the types who stand to benefit from a book. So people who have a business or are a coach or are a consultant or have some way that if they share their wisdom really clearly and people love it that they have some ROI on that. Because usually the book sale return doesn't justify all the work, work and cost that goes into it.

We end up with a lot of CEOs, a lot of, of consultants, um, a lot of kind of, pro-professional services folks who have interesting insights but generally it's just people who have some valuable wisdom to share and some benefit to, to gain if that wisdom is shared with the right audience.

Whitney: All right, so now you published the book, on, you have graphic designers, you've, you've designed it so it's beautiful, you've built the website for them. On the marketing side, what do you do exactly? Because you just made the point earlier that people really have to be willing to do their own marketing and that, and there is a partnership between the author and the publishing house. So, so how much of that do you actually take on?

Zach: Yeah, it's, so, it's a really interesting question, because when you talk about book marketing, it all seem- tends to get lumped together because when a, when a traditional publisher does book marketing, the, the metric for success is how much revenue did the book generate? Right? Like that's, they are a success if the book makes lots of money, they're not if it doesn't.

But for authors the goals tend to be a little bit different, right? You'll have some authors who say, "I would love to give away 2000 copies if they could get into the right people's hands." Well, from the publisher's perspective, that's a marketing expense. From an author's perspective that could be the actual big win. Same goes with generating leads for a business, or generating speaking gigs, and all of these things that tend to benefit an author more, which tend to come from depth of connection with the right readers as opposed to breadth of connection.

The publisher doesn't care about it in the same way that an author does, so when we approach marketing, it's interesting, because we, we're on a different business model.

We charge a flat fee, and we don't take any rights and royalties, which means that we have to come at this from first principles of what do authors actually want out of marketing, not just the assumption that we're trying to maximize revenue.

There's not one marketing solution that works for everyone. So what we do for every author is we, we make sure that they come out of the gate strong. We have a process where we uh, help them leverage their network to get support. Uh, we promote the book through some, some channels that we have to get early sales. We help them go through a process to get reviews both on Amazon and through reviewers. Uh, and then we publish a few early pieces of media, attention, hosting them on a podcast we have, getting excerpts published in a few places.

So that's, that's all like the foundation and we, that we call kind of first week promotions to get the book some, some early momentum. And then we'll just give them the instructions on what to do from there in order to leverage it. Because for a lot of them it's, it's more intertwined with their business than a stand alone thing.

But for a certain segment of authors where the motivation is really maximizing the number of people who they reach with the book, we've got a larger marketing option where we're more focused on uh, getting them in the media, like having journalists cover the book, um, building a more sophisticated website, then booking speaking engagements, contributing content. Basically whatever we can do to spread the message of the book to the widest possible audience.

Whitney: So, when people hire you, what's, I mean, I'm assuming there's a range of pricing, but from a low end to the high end, what, what does it look like?

Zach: Our prices have been, are \$25,000 is our base, and that's, it's not like a base where there's always all of these add-ons. The vast majority of our authors pay, pay \$25,000. On June 15th, we are rebranding, and this is, I think the first time we've talked about this publicly, but uh, we're rebranding, changing the name of the company, changing the offering, adding more editors to the process, adding more in depth marketing to the process, a whole bunch of changes, and the [prices will be \\$36,000 starting June 15th](#).

Whitney: Tell us about some of the um, recent authors you've worked with, and some of the books and projects that have been really interesting, um, of late.

Zach: The one, the, the, there's a few recent ones that I've been really excited about. Um, a big one was, was towards the end of last year. Do you know who uh, who Tiffany Haddish is?

Whitney: I don't.

Zach: So, she's, she's an, a, comedian. She was in *Girls Trip* last, last summer. Uh, she hosted SNL towards the end of last year, uh, and is just hysterical and, and brilliant, and so, uh, we yeah, we worked with her, uh, and same kind of situation right? She's a comedian, she's got incredible stories, she's funny, she's inspirational, but obviously, just isn't a

writer and just busy, kind of doing all these other important things, and so we worked with her to write the book, [The Last Black Unicorn](#), uh, which kind of tells her story and, and uh, yeah, it was both funny and, and pretty deep, uh, and it came out towards the end of last year and got incredible results.

It was on the New York Times Best Seller List for a number of weeks, she was on Trevor Noah, and on Ellen and, and these other big outlets, and it was fun for us to see, see all the positive attention for that.

Whitney: Oh, congratulations. That's amazing.

Zach: But that, that's not really our typical book at all, right? Our, our typical book is far more focused on, we'll almost always approach books from the perspective of solving a specific problem. So what we want, especially for a nonfiction business kind of author, we want to understand before we even start writing, what is the problem that an audience member is facing that they're complaining about at a cocktail party to their friends that their friends would bring up your book as the solution to?

Because if you, if you can really make that clear, you're building in so much more word of mouth and you're ensuring you're not just writing a book for yourself. Um, and so a lot of them are relatively niche or focused, um, just as, as an example recently, we just published a book for Cameron Herold, who is uh, he was the COO of 1-800-GOT-JUNK, now he's a major CEO coach, uh, and he, he published a book called [Vivid Vision](#), about how business owners need to think through mapping out their ideal future and setting goals in order to work towards that.

So, very, very clear specific kind of purpose for the book and the kind of thing that, that it's not interesting until it's the most interesting thing in the world, and I'd say that about a lot of our books, because like they're solving a specific problem that people either don't care or are obsessed with, and that's what we're going for.

Whitney: For people who are thinking about writing a book what are, uh, one or two tips that you would give to them?

Zach: I mean, that's, what I just said is the biggest thing by far, like before you start writing, before you write a single word, get 100% clear on what you want out of the book, like personally, selfishly, what does a success look like, who is the audience? And not all women, or even like all women between 25 and 65. Like who is the audience who needs to be obsessed with this book for your goals to, to be accomplished, and then with those things in mind, what is the topic that they are actively complaining about that you can solve so that, so that you're really fixing a problem in their lives.

Whitney: I love that. Who are the people that need to be obsessed with the topic that you're talking about? Is that what you just said? Yeah.

Zach: Yeah, and this is the problem right? When, when authors start with what they want to write about, and then try to justify it, it's like, yes you can convince yourself that people

will be inspired by the story of your grandparents immigrating to America. And like, they might be, but it's so hard to know that that book is going to be successful and to know the impact it will have, and it's very possible that it reaches almost nobody. But if you can get crystal clear on the people who are most important for you to reach, and then focus everything you do around solving their problems, as opposed to writing what you, what you kind of feel in the mood to write about, it just reframes everything, and the reason we do it early is because that permeates every sentence of the book.

Like if you have that figured out beforehand, and, and this is, this is one of the things that, that was the big motivation when we started doing [Book in a Box](#) as opposed to doing these other pieces ala carte, was that it's hard when someone shows up with a finished book and says, "Let's do marketing." Because in many cases, that book, the best marketing you can do is to write a great book that actually solves a problem.

And so, by starting that conversation at the very beginning, we're able to say, who is this for, and what kind of media is going to want to cover it, and bake all of that into the product that we're creating. So, number one advice by far is like, write a book that solves one specific problem for one specific group of people, not just whatever comes to your mind.

Whitney: Love it. That's great advice. Really, really good advice. So, if you go onto your website, [Book in A Box](#), join our tribe, you have some interesting thoughts about how to build a company.

Zach: So, Tucker and I, when we started the company, we were, we were about five months of [Book in A Box](#) and about eight months of this experimentation phase where we didn't hire anyone. Our goal was like let's keep it just us until we really have a solid foundation that we know we're going to be really long term focused on building on.

And so once we started hiring people, we hadn't really realized how weird we were in the way we worked with each other, because both of us for the most part have avoided, uh, have not been a part of the corporate world very much. I, I spent probably cumulatively six months working at a bank once, he worked at a law firm for like eight days before he got fired, that's the, that's the extent of our corporate experience.

So, a lot of the things that we took for granted and that are often kind of taken for granted in the entrepreneurial world uh, we, we hadn't realized how different they were, and so as we hired people we kind of needed to reexamine what are the implicit ways that we're working with each other, and how do we make sure that those are communicated so that other people can be a part of it, right? Because we would, our first employee, Andrew, we would find, he would do something, and we'd be like, "Well, why are you doing that?" And then his reasoning would make perfect sense, it's just that we hadn't explained to him that there was another way of approaching things. And so we've started to be really intentional chronicling, uh, the ways in which we are incredibly open and honest with each other, uh, the ways in which we put relationships first within the company and put people first within the company. Um, the- the thing ... the ways that we prioritize learning and how to-

Whitney: Wait, can you ...

Zach: Yeah.

Whitney: Before you ... before you keep going, so what's an evidence of, um ... You said you put people first in the company, what's something really practical that you've done that would, um, show that ... that in fact ... that y- you ... it's not just talk, it's actually ... you walk your talk.

Zach: (Laughs) yeah, it's- it's funny. E- every single person we hire, there's a period about, like, three weeks in where they come and they're like ... something happened and they're like, "Whoa, you guys aren't kidding," like, "this is ... this is no joke." It's mostly about the, uh ... the- the like frame and expectations that are set. So like, I think that the ... the bigger ways that that impacts people are like day-to-day with their ... with the people that they report to and that kind of thing. But I'll give you a big ... a big example, because it's easier to latch onto.

So one of the things that we do twice a year ... Our company is about half remote, half based in Austin, and twice a year, the remote half all comes into town and we- we spend a few days together. And the- the core of that few days that we spend together is doing something that we call "strengths and obstacles." And basically, we sit in a big group, so right now it's 37 people in the company, we all sit together and the new people go, one by one, and we focus on them and we talk through what are their strengths. So they write up their list that they think are their strengths, and we have everyone else in the room add to that list. "Oh, no, you didn't think to say you're amazing at this, and you're so caring and you're so compassionate." And it's ... we think of it like what are the things that people say about each other at their funerals, but they never get to hear while they're alive?

And so we really go through and spend time talking through and helping people realize what they're amazing at. And then we talk about like what they really want out of life, and we go through what they want from work and what they want in their relationships, personally. And then we talk about their obstacles, so really dive into like what's holding them back from getting what they want. And these can get pretty harsh, they can also be pretty eye-opening. I'd say probably about half the company would say it was one of the most impactful experiences of their lives. Um, and- and in many cases-

Whitney: So all 37 of you, sitting in a room-

Zach: Yeah.

Whitney: You're having this conversation?

Zach: I mean, it's ... 37 is starting to stretch it. We ... it was ... it worked really well at eight, it worked pretty well at 12, now that we're up in the 30s, we're ... these conversations go for about two, two and a half hours per person, so we- we spend two full days doing it and usually get through eight to 10 people. And what it does is it sets people on a path

for understanding both very clearly what is in their way, because these ... the people who know them, some of the best in the world, are giving them very direct feedback, but also it gets rid of all the voices in their heads that are saying, "Oh, well I'm screwing up in this way, and this person doesn't like that I do this." And like, no, we're- we're getting crystal clear on- on what the real truth is.

And the reason that I bring this up as something that shows that we're caring about people is, A, like we could spend those few days together doing a lot of things. I think a lot of companies spend their kind of off-sites on strategy or whatever, for us, by far the most important thing, uh, is not th- ... this ... A lot of this isn't about a work context, but as a part of this tribe, as a part of us working together, uh, we want to make sure that they're able to become the best version of themselves on an individual level. And so, we're ... when we have to prioritize what do we want to do over these few days that we have together? Our top priority is, "Let's break down the wall between who you are at work and who you are outside of work, and let's help you across that- that entire spectrum s- ... kind of see reality and support you in- in becoming ... becoming who you want to become."

And um, that- that carries out of that room substantially, as well. So we have people posting on Slack every day about how they made a major decision in their life because of the conversations that came after that, and ... or they made investment decisions based on some conversations that- that have turned around their financial situation, or they broke off a relationship that wasn't serving them, all of these things. And because ... because of that as the center ... because that exists as the center point to start those conversations, we're all able to support each other in a deeper, more human way, as opposed to the more surface level work relationships that I've experienced in the past.

Whitney: That's fascinating. Very, very, very interesting, um, and really ... really powerful. So, what are you going to do now that you've got more than 35 people?

Zach: Yeah.

Whitney: How are you going to adapt?

Zach: Right, s- so there's a few things, and- and it's somewhat a work in progress. The way that we have been doing it is that we'll just do that in-person, big group event for ... just for the new people, so they get kinda one big group chance to discuss it. And then on an ongoing basis after that, people will work with what we call a "guide," who's not really a mentor as much as someone to just hold a mirror up for you regularly to- to continue to work on the things that- that ... uh, that came up during that call, so ... that ... during that conversation.

To have a place to be accountable and check in and talk through things. So we'll generally, out of that set-up monthly meetings, to continue to ... to have those conversations and move forward on those things that were discussed.

And at some point, we're ... I ... possibly ... probably not for this next summit we do, but the one after, we're likely gonna have to break the group in half in order to do it in smaller groups, which I'm very upset about, but I think it ... I think it's the reality that we're- we're getting closer to.

Whitney: Hmm. So how do you choose the ... who's gonna guide whom?

Zach: Uh, we ... I mean it's getting a little logis- ... uh, tactical, but it's a ... we have a double opt-in system-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Zach: So basically, everyone choose who they want to be their own guide and then puts their top three in order, and then those three people are able to say, "Yes, I'm willing to do it," or, "No, I'm not."

Whitney: Oh, okay, like the batching system for medical school or something, or for college.

Zach: (Laughs) right, yeah, exactly.

Whitney: So- so I would imagine ... I mean, this is ... this is like a 360 review in public, um, it requires, uh, people who are fairly resilient. I would suspect there have been tears on one or two occasions, sometimes for joy, sometimes for sadness. Is there one interview question that you ask frequently to get at, um, the attributes that you're looking for, um, in- in your tribe?

Zach: I don't think there's one specific question, but it does definitely come through in interviews. Like we have a lot of people who apply for jobs, but we have to ... we filter down so much because this is such a rare attribute, the mix of, um, result focused seriousness, like focus on learning, mixed with an extreme, open vulnerability and- and willing to ... t- ... willingness to- to kinda open up and show weakness and- and, uh, be ... yeah, be open with people.

Um, and so most of that just comes out through conversation. I mean, our head of people is extremely empathic and- and, uh, open and- and kinda veers towards those conversations naturally, and the truth is, like the way that we all are and the way that we interview, conversations naturally drift towards, uh, more- more deep, personal topics. And the ways that people engage with those topics, m- ... shows us a lot about whether they're going ... whether they would be able to function within this group. 'Cause it's not just about ... about strengths and obstacles, right? That's ... that is one example that is easy for someone on the outside to somewhat comprehend, but-

Whitney: Right.

Zach: The truth is, that ... it permeates all the work we do, every day, all the time, and so it's really important that we find people who are ... who- who bring that attitude to- to their work every day.

Whitney: Fascinating. Okay, just a few more questions. Um, so you've got this [fascinating Google Doc](#), it's called the "[Book in a Box Culture Doc](#)," um, which will potentially have a different name in two or three months.

Zach: (Laughs).

Whitney: Um, primarily authored by your founder, Tucker ... or co-founder, Tucker Max. So, can anybody come on here and, um ... it looks like it.

Zach: Yeah.

Whitney: "We want feedback on content, not copy editing."

Zach: (Laughs).

Whitney: So how often do you look at this document?

Zach: Uh, so yeah, we have ... we have two versions of it, we've got [the public one](#) and then we have a ... a private one, 'cause usually if you go to the public one, there's ... there's five or 10 people looking at it at any time, and it's covered in ... covered in comments, some of which are brilliant and incredibly useful, and some of which are not very brilliant and not very useful.

So we've got our- our private version that we reference all the time. Everyone in the company has a printed out, kind of a short form version of it, and literally like watching our day-to-day conversations, things from there will come up multiple times a day, These are principles that are focused on how we make decisions on a day-to-day basis. And so if ... if they're not able to be used in order to actually kind of inform our decisions wh- ... every day as we're working, then they aren't- aren't useful.

And so, uh ... y- yeah, these come up all the time, and then usually about once a month, we'll comb through [the public document](#), review the comments, incorporate any changes into the other one, get ... respond to some people who- who ask questions, and kind of get it all cleaned up and- and then reset it again so that the comments don't get too overwhelming.

Whitney: This is so interesting. Uh, what are you excited about over the next, um, six months to a year with your business? And how can people find you?

Zach: So one of the big things that we're working on now obviously is the- the rebrand, right? Changing the branding, increasing the price, but then also substantially improving the service, and so really going through and thinking about what's every single thing we could do to make this even better than it already is?

And then the other side of that has been ... what we found is that a lot of people don't need as much service, right? We have some people who say, "I really wanna type it out myself," or um, "I don't have that much money to spend," or um, "I just- just kinda

wanted advice more than ... more than, uh, the actual end-to-end support." And so one of the things we've just launched is what we call our [Guided Author Program](#)," where people fly down to Austin for two days and we go through all the mushy parts together. We figure out their positioning, we really narrow that in, w- we craft the outline together, we have editors in the room to help them work through all that. Uh, and then we send them home with a clear writing plan and a accountability and editing process where they're checking in with their editor and submitting chapters, their editor is reviewing them. Uh, and- and just like a ... a clear path to go from there to the finished book over the course of the next 10-12 months.

Uh, so I'm- I'm really excited about that, because we've been somewhat limited in- in if we're gonna work with someone, we've gotta charge a high price point, 'cause we have so much time and effort that goes into supporting each author, and so the ability now to be able to work with people at a lower price point and- and kinda open the door to a whole other type of person with a whole other type of story to share is really- really exciting for me.

Whitney: That's fascinating. So, from a ... thinking about this from the disruption theory, so I- I had co-founded a- a firm with Clayton Christensen to invest in disruptive innovation, and one of the things the theory talks about is when you're initially disrupting, you need to, um, do soup to nuts like you have done with [Book in a Box](#). But then once you've been able to figure out what the process is, then the next stage is to, um, break it down into component pieces. So you're- you're in effect, you've done it, you've built the process, now you're gonna break it into deeper ... into it's component pieces, effectively disrupt yourself on a number of different fronts.

Zach: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: People can still come to you with the ... for [the entire package](#), but then you can offer these different services and see how that evolves. It's ... it sounds-

Zach: That's it.

Whitney: Fascinating.

Zach: Yeah, and- and strangely end up back ... back close to where we started when we were doing all the experimentation, just with a thousand authors under our belts and a much deeper understanding and- and an amazing team to- to really make it happen.

Whitney: Right. So where can people find you? I know you said you're rebranding. I love the ... I love the name [Book in a Box](#), but it sounds like you're trying to make sure that you're going to be able to represent everything that you're offering, so where would you suggest people look for you?

Zach: Yeah, the new company is called "Scribe," um, and the website is [scribemia.com](#).

Whitney: Okay, fantastic. All right, Zach, thank you so much for being with us. We are very grateful for your time and your story and the sharing of your expertise.

Zach: Yeah, thanks so much for having me. It was fun.

Two highlights in my discussion with Zach. The first is for non-fiction authors and answering that big question - What problem will your book solve? You're at a party. One person is talking about a problem they want to solve. And top of mind the other person says immediately, "Read X." That's what I do when someone says to me my relationship with money is fraught. I say read [You Were Born Rich](#) by Bob Proctor. Done.

Also, I thought that what they're doing for their off-sites is fascinating. There's a scalability problem. But imagine if instead of your offsites being someone speaking (don't imagine because then I won't have a job). But actually do imagine. If everyone shared what everyone else's superpower is, their obstacles in a real-time 360 review. Transformative.

Practical tip: The next time you are having a sit-down with someone you work with or even someone in your family, make a point of saying to them--there's this thing that you do well—actually that you do brilliantly, in fact, I think it's one of your superpowers. Because I've never done this with my husband. Here goes. You, honey, explain things logically and simply without talking down to people. And if you're in a room, everyone's calmer. These are your superpowers. Now it's your turn. Actually, not his turn, but your turn – who I'm talking to. Who are you going to have this conversation with?

Thank you to Scott for leaving our review of the week on Amazon for Build an A Team. He said -

A great read! Whitney Johnson provides great tools for managers of all levels and those who aspire to become managers. Working within the S Curve, it's easy to visualize the goal of keeping your team in its collective sweet spot and each individual in their personal sweet spot. Professors would do well to include Johnson's concepts as part of their graduate curriculum.

Thank you so much, Scott! 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.

If you'd like to learn more about *Build an A Team*, my book with Harvard Business Review Press-- the book that will help you solve the problem of how do I get people to want to work for me -- download the first chapter at whitneyjohnson.com/ateam.

Thank you again to Zach Obront for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis, Libby Newman, Heather Hunt and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson. And this is Disrupt Yourself.