

## Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

### Episode 77: Beth Comstock

Whitney: Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak, and live all things disruption. My guest is Beth Comstock, former vice-chair of GE, a member of the Board at Nike, and author of [Imagine It Forward](#), a candid and encouraging narrative in which she shares both business and life lessons. It's out today, it's sure to be an instant bestseller, I highly recommend it.

Welcome, Beth. We are so happy to have you.

Beth: Thanks, Whitney. I've been looking forward to this, thank you.

Whitney: So, very first question for you is, where did you grow up? And, what did you think you were going to be when you were growing up?

Beth: Yeah, well, I grew up in the Shenandoah valley of Virginia, a small town called Winchester, Virginia. And, um, I loved my small town. It was incredibly nurturing, and, um, I- I think growing up, my- my, uh, my father was a dentist, my mother was a schoolteacher. Um, early on, I think I wanted to be a schoolteacher, um, and then, um, really I, uh, as I got older I wanted to g- get into medicine, and eventually be a ... I knew I wanted to do some sort of storytelling. So, I went off to college, uh, thinking I was going to study biology to be a- a doctor, and pretty quickly, um, found my way to storytelling.

Whitney: Oh, okay. So, when you went to college, you were studying biology thinking you were going to be a doctor.

Beth: Yeah.

Whitney: Do you remember the moment when you said, "Hmm, I don't think I'm going to be a doctor. I think I want to be a storyteller."... was there a class that you took? Um, an experience that you had?

Beth: There's two experiences. One, I remember being a senior in high school, and I took this amazing humanities class, um, by this high school teacher I loved. His name is David Larik. I don't know where he is now, but I loved him. And he- we were sort of an experiment studying humanities. This was a public high school.

And my senior high school project, I decided I wanted to study the human brain. And so I locked myself in the local hospital library for pretty much the year, and kinda did a major report on studying the brain. That- that sent me off to college thinking I really wanted to be a doctor.

Um, but when I got to college, I took anthropology classes in addition to biology, and I just realized it was as much the storytelling about what the brain makes us do. So, that ... I just had these moments along the way, um ... And I think, you know, midway

through my college career, I was like, "Well, wait a minute. I don't know that I want to be a doctor, I want to tell stories about health and science."

And so I actually tried to get into some ... I took some writing classes, but I tried to get into m- to create more of a dual major, if you will. And th- those kind of blended, um, paths were not very popular back then. I just decided I wanted to be a science reporter, and that was kind of the- the journey that I went on.

Whitney: Huh. Okay, so, Beth, I have my first dare ... it might be the only one, but there might be another one in our conversation. I would encourage you to track down David Larik and tell him how influential he was. Can you imagine having a student come back 20, 30 years later and say, "thank you?" So, I would really encourage you-

Beth: I'm going to do that. That's the magic of Facebook, I'll start there. But that's a great suggestion, Whitney, I'm going to do that.

Whitney: Yeah, I'm just thinking, 'cause right now we have a daughter who's a senior in high school, and she's taking sociology from a, um, a professor that she really likes, and I think, wow, I wonder if that could be the professor that's pivotal for her. So, yeah, I'm excited that you're gonna reach out to your, um, your high school, uh, teacher.

Okay, so you- you're in college. You get out of college and you really want to be a reporter. And, then you've got an on-air journalist, and then your life starts to be full of disruption. So, you get divorced, you're a single mom. Then you go to work doing publicity at the NBC's Washington news bureau. Move to New York, you have a stint at CNN. You go to CBS, you come back to NBC, and you turn this around.

But before you did that, uh, you're at CBS, you make the decision to go to NBC, and people ... can you tell us a little bit about that decision, why people questioned it? And, how that decision became a pretty important decision for you?

Beth: Yeah, in- in hindsight, it became perhaps one of the most pivotal career decisions I made.

So, I was at CBS doing entertainment publicity, and, um, it was ... the network was rocking then. It was the number one network, uh, rated network. All the top shows ... and, um, I was the director of entertainment publicity, and it was- it was a fun job. And, uh, I got a call from someone saying, "Would you be interested in coming back to NBC?" I had left several years earlier, and, um, they had ... there specifically was a job open running, um, communications for the news division.

And I have to just do a little history lesson. At that time, the news division had been pretty much brought to its knees, I mean, almost closed down in kind of an original fake news incident, if you will, that the news division ... Uh, one of the shows had staged something with a- a truck, uh, had- had blown it up for the effects of the camera, and it wasn't real life. Most of the people who were involved, even the president of the news division, got fired.

And so they ... NBC News was a really dark place at that time, and they were having a hard time attracting people to- to go there.

Here I was at the top TV network, and things were great, and I just had to take this job.

I got a better title. I went from, like, director to VP. If I'm- if I- to tell you the truth, I didn't ... I think I got a lateral salary. I- I might have squeezed out a few thousand dollars, but I just ... it was something I wanted to be part of. It was just this challenge. I can't describe it, and I- I distinctly remember I told my boss I was going to leave, and, um, as word started getting out, the night before I was gonna, I- I was about to announce it, I had people calling me, um, saying, like, "I need to warn you off of this. This is career suicide, this is such a stupid idea. Why would you do this?" I mean, people I trusted. And I couldn't really articulate it. I just wanted to be part of this. I, I felt the resurrection of something would be just an incredible experience.

So, what did I learn, I- it ended up being my- one of my best jobs ever. I was part of a team, they brought in Andy Lack to run the news division, and so we all had nothing to lose. And it ended up for me, uh, making me appreciate, um, that big companies could allow you to be entrepreneurial.

Um, and the team we put together, certainly the team I worked with in communications, we were incredibly scrappy and creative, and ... oh, my gosh. It was one my favorite moments, uh, in team building, bonding, and creativity. And, um, and it proved to me I could do this. And I worked for somebody who, uh, allowed me to be creative.

So, so that's ... that's the story. I don't know why I took the job, honestly. There was no logic or reason, um, except that it was just something I felt I had to part of.

Whitney: So interesting. So, what year was this? Was this in the '90s?

Beth: It would have been the early '90s, yeah.

Whitney: The early '90s, okay.

So, it's fascinating, I- I think this, this goes to a question I think oftentimes when people make a decision where on paper ... So you look at it and you're weighing it out, and you're like, okay, CBS to NBC, sort of ... that makes no sense, right? Complete step down. Title slightly up, so that makes sense. Um, from a pay, it's lateral. But from a prestige standpoint, certainly huge step down. And yet, somewhere in your gut, you're like, I've got to do this, right?

Beth: Yeah. Yeah. And- and it's hard when you can't really explain it. It's just like, no, I have to- I have to be part of this. And I've since come to appreciate more of my, the way I'm wired and myself, and I like a good meaty challenge, and I'm not sure I was cognizant of that then as I am now. I've gotten to know myself better. But, um, I think I just felt that I needed to be part of that challenge.

Whitney: So, you mentioned, um, something about that experience, that it was just a great team. Can you think of one or two reasons that made it such a great team?

Beth: What made it a great team was that we had that feeling of, we had nowhere to go but up. So, we had nothing to lose.

Whitney: Hmm.

Beth: I think what happens when companies and teams, you know, are victorious ... it, the risk taking becomes harder, because you have all these supposed accomplishments and status and all these things that- that keep you in a tighter rein. We had nothing to lose. Everybody thought we were losers anyway, so why not just go for it?

At the time, uh, one of the news producers had pitched this whole window on the world studio that now we take for granted at the, uh, in 30 Rock. But it was this huge, it was this bold move to say, "We're back. We're literally opening ourselves up and being transparent."

So, the whole team that was assembled, we were just bold. And ... we didn't care about anything but sort of regaining our reputation and doing great work.

Whitney: Hmm.

Beth: And so I think it became a magnet for me to hire people, on the small communications team I ran, um, it was a bit of a filter. People who wanted that kind of experience were attracted to it, and the people who didn't weren't interested. And again, maybe that was the filter for me in taking that job, and why people had turned it down, because they maybe couldn't imagine that it could be better. So, I love that it was a bit of a filter for us.

And then, when we got together, I don't know, we just, we just inspired each other. Um, and people, um, people always brought their kind of energy in- into it. It wasn't like, "No, you can't do that." And we've all been in companies where that's the case, where you're constantly greeted with a, "No, that'll never work." Or, "No, we did that in, you know, whatever year ... " Um, there was none of that. Um, and so that's why to me it was such a special time.

Whitney: Now, you said a minute ago that this was really pivotal for you, um, in- in your career. Why is that?

Beth: Well, one, it gave me confidence in myself and my creative skills. Um, uh, I- I was working, largely we were the PR and promotion machine, and in the news division, um ... you know, they didn't always ... publicists were, you know, kind of second tier. But, the ... Andy Lack as the news division president brought us in and included us, and everyone's perspective mattered. So, I think it w- for a lot of things, it was a- the team was all in.

So that was pivotal for me to appreciate that the work I did mattered, uh, and my opinion mattered. So, that was it. And then, just quite literally, it put me in the line of doing some amazing projects that got me visibility.

So, um, the biggest one was we launched MSNBC, um, the network there, and it put me in the line of work, working with, um, Jack Welch who was then running GE, Bill Gates who was then running Microsoft. Very scary and daunting kinds of, uh, exposure for someone at that- at that level of her career. But, it put me on the GE radar, which eventually, several years later, would open the way for me to go to GE again, another kind of weird, uh, counterintuitive move.

But, um, all those things happened because I took a chance on a job that seemingly was a dud.

Whitney: I love that. I love it. And it- it's interesting what you said about how your opinion mattered, your skills that h- that had been in sort of, for other contexts considered potentially frilly or frothy were actually seriously valued. And, as you said, it gave you some visibility.

So, you just alluded to this a moment ago, but you're now head of comms at NBC, and you get a call. (laughs)

Beth: Yeah.

Whitney: You get a call to go up to an office. Tell us about what happened then?

Beth: Yeah, so out of NBC News, I went to run communications for all of NBC for a couple years. So, there were a couple years between this. And then, um, I, uh, I got put on that GE radar through, through the NBC News and the NBC Experience. And, uh, I got a call one day from Jack Welch, he had an office in our building at 30 Rock at the time, and his assistant Roseanne Badowski said, "Can you come upstairs?"

And so, you know, I grab my notepad. I remember it, grabbed my notepad, and I- I assumed Jack Welch wanted to see me because they were going to sell NBC. That was a constant rumor from the day they bought it, um, to 25 years later when they actually, GE actually did sell it. And, I was ready for him to say, "Okay, we're selling it, you know, h- how do you think we position it?" Here's what ... And he said, "I want you to come and work at GE. And we're leading this big transition, and I'm going to step down in a few years, and ... you know, I need someone to help lead communications and I want you to do advertising."

And it was the farthest thing from my mind. I ima- in fact, truth be told, I had re- I had been called for an interview in another television network. And I probably wasn't going to do it, but you know, I- I- I- my ideas were to keep going in television. So, when he said, "Can you come and work at GE," I don't ... GE was like going to Mars. Um, he was a very well-known, not quite the celebrity CEO he became, at that point. But again, one of those, like, "Wow. I have to do this."

And I, um, I remember I went down and, uh, head of HR, who had become somewhat of a, a great advisor to me, and had known this was going to happen, but hadn't given me a tip off- hadn't tipped me off, which was unusual. He said, "You know you're going to take it, and you know you can't say no." Not like, it's being forced on you, but you know this is a challenge that you want to take. And he was right, and that's the way, again, I felt about it.

And at the time, just to sort of set the scene, a lot of people tried to get into NBC from GE. I mean, it sounded fun and, um, few people wanted to leave NBC to go to GE. I remember I was standing on our elevator bank after I'd announced it, and one of my colleagues said, "Huh. So, you'd rather- you'd rather work with light bulbs than media properties? Explain yourself."

And, um, even my mom was like, "Oh. GE."

Whitney: (laughs)

Beth: 'Cause we had a light- a light bulb factory in our town. "Oh. Like, the light bulb company?" Um ...

Whitney: (laughs)

Beth: And so, you know, again, it's one of those moments where ... I- I just felt there was a opportunity awaiting for me that I wanted to be part of. And so, uh, again, without really knowing, I- I share in the book, I- one of my first GE meetings with the team I went to work with, they were talking about a 10K, and literally I thought they were talking about running a race. I was not-

Whitney: (laughs)

Beth: ... steeped in financial ... the financial world. I mean, certainly NBC was part of GE, and I was a business communicator. But I wasn't steeped in some of the details. I hadn't gone to business school. So, it was a- a lot of learning on a lot of levels.

Whitney: Yeah, so, that's another ... again, another counterintuitive move, and I- I suppose in retrospect it feels less counterintuitive, because like you said, Jack Welch at that time wasn't quite the luminary that he is, and we're always, there's always, you know, some excitement around media. But, for many people that cared about you and loved you, this move did not make sense.

Beth: Yeah, it didn't. And, you know, NBC- that's I think maybe a lesson to impart or share from ... what I found at NBC, and look, there were ... it's an incredibly creative company. A lot of the media companies I worked for are. But, they're also ... people are often afraid to change, because they are- they know too much, or they love the industry so much they don't want to risk anything. And so, I saw quite a few people who were not happy working there, um, but they were enamored with the title, or what their mother said, you know, oh, their mother's like, "Oh, my son works at NBC," and you know, she

... My mother would do that. She'd brag about everything. And it- it keeps you there sometimes for the wrong reason.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Beth: Because again, those external expectations, people ... It's your- your identity as the company, less than you.

So I can understand why people would say that, right? They didn't know differently, and frankly neither did I. So, I couldn't really give them an excuse of why. Just, "I have to do this."

Whitney: So, it's interesting, um, you talk a- a bit in the book about this, um, experience of moving into marketing, and- and you say, I'm quoting you now, um, that you were a neophyte marketer ... um, actually I'm paraphrasing. You were a neophyte marketer, and were you really going to revive the ethos of Edison, um, given that you didn't know much about marketing?

So, what did you do? Do you recall, um, couple of the steps or processes that you did, for our listeners, when you get thrown into a brand new industry. You know nothing about it, you know it's the right thing to do. What are some things that you did in order to get yourself up that learning curve quickly?

Beth: Yeah. So, I went to GE and worked in ... as Jack Welch transitioned. And then Jeff Immelt took over as CEO, and soon thereafter tapped me as Chief Marketing Officer. And I did not have traditional marketing expertise. Sure, I grew up in a media marketing field, I did promotion, but I didn't- was not classically trained in marketing. Had not been to business school.

Um, and so, you know, I'm excited, "Yay, this is great." But, now what? And, um, so, I just did what I think is kind of my move, in that, um, I just immersed myself in discovery, in learning, in being a sponge of soaking it up. And so, I think in those stages, your- your challenge is you want to show that you were hired for a reason, and that you know what you're doing. But you really don't.

And so I had to kinda own that I didn't know. And so I gave myself 90 to 100 days to just be a just incredible student.

So, a couple things I did. I grabbed every marketing textbook. I grabbed every book of Phil Kotler who, uh, you know, kind of, uh, if you've been to business school, is sort of the dean of marketing. The four Ps of marketing, which were very classic. Um, read everything I could get my hands on. I reached out to headhunters I knew and said, "Who are the best marketers out there? Can you introduce me?" I would call them up, and I would just say, "I have this job. I'm new. How do you define marketing? What are you measured on? You know, what are- what are you ... how's your team structured?"

And then I had a couple of them, in particular Jim Stengel, who was then the CMO of P&G, who were just incredible, uh, teachers. And Jim's like, "Come out. You know, bring your team." And literally he- he helped school me and my team, frankly, because we were hiring more marketers, on what we needed to do for marketing.

And, um, I would ask people like Jim, "Well, like, how are you training your marketers?" And I'm sure he thought, 'cause I was going to set up a training program, which I was, but ... it was really 'cause I was, needed to know how ... what I needed to know. So, I just, I- I just immersed myself. And I ga- asked the people I worked for, my boss and others, just give me- give me this window of time to come up to speed, and then I'll come back to you and say, "Here's what I think our- our mission should be," in addition to what you-

So- so Jeff Immelt at the time said, "I want marketing to be about new revenue growth, about organic growth," would be the business term. You know, new revenue from new sources. New revenue from existing sources. Um, then I had to figure out a way to turn that into action. But, I needed the language, I needed the network, and I needed, I needed just some time.

So, that would have been the- the kind of lesson there. And I- I think if- I- any new job, even if you think you're an expert, um, challenge yourself to figure out what are the new parts. Give it some time, and really immerse in kind of the new aspects that- that you need to learn.

Whitney: Yeah. I think that's super helpful, and- and, you know, one of the things that I- I'm just finding fascinating, and I'm not even sure I'm going to have the words to articulate this, but I- I'm looking at this and I'm thinking, okay, this was 20 years ago, and you ... you talk about how, at the time, and I'm quoting you now, marketing was basically the way to sell or launch a product. It was advertising trade shows, sales collateral, and a publicity event. At worst it was washed up sales people, and ... and as I'm looking at what you felt like your mission was, which is how do you make marketing into an innovation engine that inspires cultural transformation, when at some level it seems like you were almost a chief revenue officer, but ... I don't know. I just think this is so fascinating that you're ... you really ... certainly you were thinking about marketing, a- and Jeff Immelt was thinking about marketing very differently as well.

I mean, did you realize that that's what was happening? Or did it only occur to you later?

Beth: It only occurred as I kind of discovered, certainly what the arena was, what the business needed. And again, this is one of those moments where, they hadn't had marketing, uh, a defined marketing initiative or department in 20 years.

So, it wasn't like I ... someone handed me the, you know, the tablet with all the rules etched in stone. I had kinda free rein.

Jeff had- Immelt had started at GE in the marketing department and then moved into sales, so he had an idea of what he wanted it to be, based on, you know, him being there when the marketing department was there.

I felt, again, in my discovery, let's take the titles seriously. Marketing. Marketing is about living in the market, going to where the customer is, where trends are happening, and perhaps it was because it was also my interest to get what's next, what's new ... it became a pretty easy gap that needed filled, and for marketing to own that, to say, "We're about, um, new revenue, about new insights that are going to grow our business," because no one else was doing that. Uh, product innovation was happening, but wasn't necessarily connected to the trends in where the market was going.

Um, so in some ways marketing for us was about kind of a GPS, a- a- a compass, to say this is, this is where the world's going. Um, and so we had to hire mark- I had to go out and hire a lot of chief marketing officers at our business units who had that kind of ... who shared that vision. Um, and we put them into places where business leaders didn't know what to expect of them, both good and bad. And, um, so ... in some ways you can- you can declare it, but because ... and because people don't have expectations, that's great. Um, but on the other hand, they had seen marketing to what you said is, it's what you do at the end. It's an ad, it's a trade show, it's a brochure. And we were saying, yes, but it's much more.

And so, the challenge was trying to convince people of that, when they wanted it to just be at the end, and we were saying, no, it's much more about strategy, and innovation. And that was hard. People had to see it, we couldn't just tell them. And so we took on things, you know, we created a sort of, um, idea generation initiative to seed new revenue-generating ideas.

Um, it puts marketing at a bit of, um, tension point with sales, with product development people. And so, you have to work through all of those things to understand what everybody's role is.

Whitney: So, so talk about that for a minute. Are these the imagination breakthroughs that you talked about in the book?

Beth: Yeah. Yeah.

Whitney: Okay. So, can you talk a little bit about what that was that you did, and- and- and the way you talk about it, I love, you say you have to tether technology to a need, and marketing is about creating markets. And so, can you talk a little bit about that process of those imagina- imagination breakthroughs, or IBs, and how you- you did manage the tension with both sales and product development.

Beth: Yeah, well, I ... what I loved about the imagination breakthroughs w- were- was it was a, one, it was a, it was an exam- a series of examples of what marketing can do. So, again, back to, like, having a great strategy, but people don't know what you're talking about, you have to show them.

Um, two, it was a need that the company had, and we had to grow our markets. We had to grow new revenue from new places.

So, we declared we're going to start these new idea- these business ideas, and we set a target of they had to generate, I think in our case, we said \$100 million in three to five years. And what got people kind of crazy was we said there isn't a central pool of money, every business unit has to fund it and we'll, we'll have sort of a growth- central growth fund to help augment it.

So, people were like, "Oh." Like, "I've got- I've gotta be into this."

Whitney: (laughs)

Beth: And, um, and really at the end of the day, I- I mean- I guess the message is, it was about protecting a kind of idea, and not letting it be killed when the quarterly pressures or the annual budget pressures come in. Because everybody has good ideas, but if you're not going to assign people to do it, resources to do it, it doesn't have to be a lot, and to see it through, to kill things ... to, you know, do fewer things, um ... change just doesn't happen.

And so this was for us a very- for me, especially, a very early learning of how to do that. So, really my message is ... you have to assign the people to protect those ideas, and our goal was to say, what is the- what is the customer need? Like, what problem are we trying to solve? Sometimes in technology companies, what happens is you invent or create things because you can, 'cause it's a great breakthrough, and we need that. But we don't need *only* that.

So, what we were trying to show is, hey, maybe you can take an existing technology and target it to a new segment of the market. Um, you know, take a ... in our case, you know, take a gas turbine in - in our energy generation that was used in Europe, and refine some features, and re-target it in the Middle East. Not a lot of work, a whole new opportunity.

Whitney: Hmm.

Beth: Um, may- maybe you can take an existing customer, that customer base segment that you have, and create some new applications by working with them.

Um, so these were the kind of things we were trying to put into the system. Um, and again, from the market back. And the tension we created was- was good. And it means a strong leader like- like a Jeff Immelt, or whatever the business P&L leaders were, it had to have the strength of saying, "I want the product out." So, what's our great technology going to do? And then I want the market back. And I kinda want you guys to duke it out a little bit.

Whitney: Hmm.

Beth: I want to get to a good place, because often what happens in tech companies is you overengineer the product. It has too many features, and the customer is not happy because it's too expensive, and they can't use it that well.

I think a market-backed view says, "We only want these kind of features for this customer segment, and they're only willing to pay this amount of money." So, it sets certain constraints. And therein lies the tension.

But, you definitely get a better place, and we only had one half of that equation.

Whitney: Interesting. And so, by creating those constraints, then, it required that product development and sales and you, marketing, who were creating the context where the tension could play out, or, um, then ... it- it forced people to figure out how to work together. And, you had someone like the CEO saying, "You have to figure it out. I expect you to play nicely," so, so ...

Beth: Yeah. Or, if not play nicely, you just have to play together. The big learning, and hopefully you're nice, um, the big learning on all that, I think the tussles, and these happen in every company, are the tussles between marketing and product. Sales and Product. Sales and Marketing. And- and it's- it's these classic ones. You know, Sales say, "Yeah, but I own the customer." And Marketing's, "Yeah, but I gotta talk to the customer to understand." And, well, Sales is like, "Yeah, but I'll translate it for you." Product is like, "How do I know? I still- you have to translate it."

So, the answer really is, how do you convene that group around the customer? And it sounds so simple, but we don't do it.

And so that became, I think in our company, marketing's job was the convener.

Whitney: Hmm. Yeah.

Beth: To get that customer perspective, and- and so, Sales, you still have to own the relationship, but we're trying to do something different, earlier. And you can- I need you to be part of it, but you have a different relationship with the customer.

Um, so a lot of it is just working through what everybody's role is. And trust me, the product people get very excited, if in your company they don't currently have access to customers, they must. And so, how do you, how do you navigate that and keep the action going? Uh, and that was- I think that was really what we were trying to do.

Whitney: Yeah, and so, one other thought on that is to- to put a bow on this conversation, on this part of it, and then move to a different part is, is that you say marketing, your goal is to make marketing a part of the business process from the very beginning, not just what you do when you launch something.

Um, so, yeah. Really, really powerful, and I- I think, um, I think it's just fascinating to watch how you created and, and really ... and probably in many ways reimagined this role for, not just for GE but for the marketplace generally.

Beth: Just one thing to add to that, I, um, I s- I work a lot with startups and co- so- companies that are scaling, and I have to say, um, product-focused companies, even- even our newest, greatest digital and product companies, I don't think they appreciate this in marketing. So, it's a bit of a mission for me, still.

Whitney: Hmm.

Beth: Um, to say marketing is not just what you do at the end. It's not just the advertising and the press release. It is what you do at the beginning to understand the market, and I think there is a bit of a bias that, yeah, but we're the product people. But you can't do everything.

So, anyway, I- I just put that plug in that I don't think it's just limited to kind of older companies or industrials that- by any stretch.

Whitney: Right. And I- I think, to me as I- I think about this book, I think that's one of the real opportunities that you have for people ... have, in terms of helping organizations understand the role that marketing can play, and you being, uh, you know, the epitome of that.

The other one thing I want to add to this, I think was fascinating, is that you also talk about when you, um, came up with the tagline "Imagination at Work." Brilliant, amazing, that was your team. I didn't realize that. I mean, I probably knew it, but I didn't know it. But then you said you reached out to HR, um, to figure out, okay, how- now that we're going to create this market, how do we make sure we've got the people who can create the market? And to me, as I look at that, that sounds like a highly unusual move, but one that clearly bore fruit. And, for anybody who's listening to this who's trying to build a business, or trying to make their business more successful, like, make sure the people in the different parts of the business, you know, like you said, marketing and sales and product and HR, are talking to each other. Super powerful.

Beth: Yeah, thanks. No, I thought that- I- I think that was a, a great lesson, and k- honestly rewarding work. Um, we had this tagline, "Imagination at Work," and it was really a rallying cry for innovation in the culture, and- and kind of returning to our Edisonian roots, and more about building things. And, um, it- it couldn't be just a tagline. I mean, it replaced a really amazing tagline, "We Bring Good Things to Life," a classic. Amazing. But it- that was constraining the way people viewed GE. And so we needed people to be more about, um, you know, in- in- invention, and- and, uh, understanding, um, the market.

And, um, and so working with HR, we kind of used that as the filter and the strategy. And out of that, we came out with kind of five key things that were going to be part of the cultural mandate, and what people were going to have to be evaluated on as part of

their regular performance reviews. And it w- it was things like external focus, meaning, you know, are you looking outside the market? Are you in touch with your customer? Um, things, uh ... And then we actually had one of the five traits was, imagination and courage.

And I loved that, but it- it proved to be the hardest one. And the culture really struggled, I- I'd say, I think it was a 15 year struggle. Um, the culture really struggled, because you can't really image- imagine- measure imagination. But, you can, and it's not a finite number, and that was some of the struggle. And really it came to are you, are you taking risks on certain things? Do you have the courage to try things? Do you have the courage to get out of what you know, and be open to new experiences.

And so, it's a bit fuzzy, but I think the fact that it was put into the cultural framework, and- and said this is something we value, really helped make it actionable.

Whitney: Right. Right. Right. If it- if you- if you measure- if you can measure it, if you're willing to measure it, it starts- it starts to matter.

Beth: At least say it's important and have a discussion about it. And, um, and I think that maybe would be my lesson from it. Um, you can't measure it to the, you can't ... you can't put a h- a hard number around it. You can start to say, well, how many ideas did you consider? How many risks did you take on this strategy? I mean, there are ways you can do that, but it took us some time to figure that out.

Whitney: Right, exactly. You had to be really creative in finding the metrics, um, to- to figure out how to measure, or what you were trying to do there.

It's interesting in- in looking and reading through your story, it seems that you had ... or not seems, but, that you had a lot- have had a lot of people who were really willing to not only mentor you, but sponsor you. And I'm thinking in particular about, um, the story that you told about Ed Scanlon who you I think alluded to a few minutes ago. Would you share how he was important in terms of a sponsor to you, in your being able to move your career forward?

Beth: Yeah, well- it w- it- the reason I shared it in the book, 'cause he was kind of an unlikely sponsor, and- and I- I ... Here's the story.

So, um, I was at NBC News as we discussed earlier, and there was a job open at NB ... the broader NBC communications and role, and it had been open for a while. And I was kind of frustrated that they hadn't reached out to me to have me as a candidate. Um, I- in fact, I was really frustrated. So, I marched myself up and got an, you know, summoned my courage and got an appointment in his schedule, and sort of meekly said, you know, "I'd like to be considered for the job. I see you haven't filled it."

And he said, "Oh, yeah. You know, Bob," who was the head of the network at the time, "Bob and I thought of you, but, um, we know you have young kids, and this job involves a lot of travel, and we thought it just wouldn't work for you."

And I was so furious. And- I was furious at him, but I was especially furious at myself. It's one of those, like, classic moments in your career, where you're like, "Oh ... " Like, one, I was just sitting around waiting to be approached ... don't do that again. Two, and most importantly to me, is how would they know if I didn't raise my hand and tell them, "I'll figure out what's okay for me. You don't need to worry about if I can travel or not. That's up to me to worry about."

So, I hadn't told them of my interest, and I hadn't set up my parameters. And I let them fill in the gap.

Anyway, I got the job. And, um, Ed became a really great advisor, and I think hopefully I became a bit of an advisor to him, showing him that, uh, as a young mother, uh, I could travel and do my job and I ... he didn't need to worry about that for me.

Um, so, I- I like that story for all those reasons. Really, you gotta speak for yourself. You're the boss of you. You know what your- your- You know what you can do. Um, and then secondly, don't count out that people like that can also advise you down the road. And, again, I was so furious with him, but he became an advisor. And as I said, I think I advised him a bit, too. So, be open to people who might seemingly not have your best interests, or not know you, that if you're open enough you can probably learn something from them.

Whitney: Yeah, and- and if I'm correct in remembering, he was also a person who, um, afterward was willing to, um, talk about you behind your back, in a good way. Right? To say to people-

Beth: Yeah.

Whitney: ... "Hey, there's this- this person, Beth Comstock, you need to know about her. She's capable, et cetera." And I think that that ... is that correct?

Beth: Yeah, absolutely. And partly it was his job because he was HR, but he helped put me on the GE radar, for example. So, when I got that call from Jack Welch, he knew it was going to happen. But, he had been promoting me. And- and I do think there's a real difference between mentorship and championship, and in this case I would consider that good championship. And a champion is somebody who knows your story, they know what you're capable of, and they're kind of your agent a bit. They're out there talking you up.

And so, um, I think you need both. Mentors who are there to help you, kind of coach you and help you get to be better in your job, or maybe coach is even different. But, they're there to help you, give you good advice. And then a champion is somebody who's just willing to help tell your story, and- and they want you and more people like you.

So, make sure people know your story, who- who are in a position to champion you. And if you're in a position to champion others, just check in with them from time to time. Make sure you know their- their best story.

Whitney: So, one question on that, Beth, is I- I know oftentimes I hear people say, "I haven't had mentors," or, "I haven't had sponsors." And I- I have this hypothesis that some people are more sponsorable, (laughs) or championable than others. Do you have any thoughts about what makes it so that ... so that someone says, "you know, I want to champion this person." A- any thoughts or advice that you would give to people who are listening to this and saying, "I need more champions?"

Beth: I think ... you have to be vulnerable, and you have to truly want help.

It's interesting, Whitney, what you're saying about not sponsorable. I mean, I think of myself, when people have approached me and say, "Will you be my mentor? Will you help, you know, advocate for me in this." I need to understand why. Um, and if it's just, like, they're just trying to get ahead at all costs, and they just want a name to say, "Hey, she's- she's my, she's my mentor," and they're not maybe really that open, I'm not going to invest the time in that.

And so, hopefully a mentor or champion's going to try to understand what are you trying to accomplish. So, be very clear about what you're trying to accomplish, and why you need help. What- those two things, and to be honest about needing help.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Beth: Um, and that I think is hard. Just don't check the box, okay, now I have a mentor.

Uh, and last thing I'd say is, a mentor's not your mother. Um, uh, a mentor isn't going to get a job for you. I mean, I don't think my mother's going to get a job for me either, but, you know, a mentor is just there to help you be a better version of you, and help you kinda have some tips on getting ahead. But, don't delegate all the work to the mentor or champion. They're not your headhunter. They're not your ... they're not your mother. And I think maybe that makes people somewhat unsponsorable, because they expect that the person they're- they're reaching out to to do all the work for them.

Whitney: Yeah. And I would add, uh, a third thing is, um, not only, you know, do they need help, but, um ... but why is that you, Beth Comstock, can help them do that?

Beth: Oh, that's such a great one. Yeah, that's a really great add, absolutely.

Whitney: Because you want ... 'Cause sometimes it's like, "I need help!" And you're like-

Beth: Yeah.

Whitney: "Okay. Yeah, but why do ... why are you reaching out to Beth to help you? Um, why are you reaching out to John to help you," whomever.

As we start to wrap up, you- you have one quote ... actually there's lots of wonderful quotes. But one of them is, "A strategy is a story well-told." And you talked early on about how you fell in love with story, and I ... I will tell you, there was this one part of the book where, actually just thinking about it now, it's really very moving. It's after the financial crisis, and I don't know that you have the book in front of you, but it's on page 209 if you do ... But, after, after the financial crisis, you know, people were in a lot of pain. And, um, as they were after 9/11, but I'm not going to ask you to tell both of the stories. But, you were just like, y- you, and you talked to Jeff Immelt, and like, "What are we going to do? How are we going to do this?" And you said, "We've got to go back to story. We have to find a way," and you, here's your tagline of, "We build, power, move, and cure to make the world better."

Can you tell and share with us, um, some of what you did around that. Some of the stories you told, how you went about doing it so you could help people feel good about themselves, help, um, the people inside of your company feel good about themselves, feel good about GE, just tell a little bit about what you did at that point in time.

Beth: After the ... the aftermath of the financial crisis, GE's, uh, financial service model GE Capital was just ... it changed dramatically. It was totally questioned, it was no longer an asset. And it was a huge ... it was a lot to clean up, and GE's still cleaning it up. But, but this idea of Imagination at Work as kind of a rallying cry, we knew we had work to do. And so it kind of skewed a little bit to, like, let's get to work, and ... let's remind ourselves, I- at those moments, those crisis moments, I think it's always important to go back and remind yourself, like, who are we? What are our strengths? Where did we come from? As a way to think, where are we going? And we knew we were investing more in the future of the company was more in making things, and- and machines and technology.

Um, so we just started reconnecting with the making of what we were doing. The building, the making, and went out and, you know, just kind of captured stories of people who were making these amazing machines. And what you start to find is, is this really great marriage of craftsmanship and amazing ... progress and technology. And, literally, people would by hand, would start a- the process of a jet engine fan blade, drawing it by hand and then using the most sophisticated technology. So, we just said, we gotta tell these stories. The passion people have for the craftsmanship of what they do, for the outcome. And so, we just started telling stories, and my favorite one is in the- is the one you reference, and, um, it was, uh, we followed a group in, um, in North Carolina, Durham, North Carolina. And then another group outside of Milwaukee, uh, in health care.

And we watched them go from making their machine, so the team making jet engines in North Carolina, and they had never seen one of their engines take off on a plane. Sure, they'd been on a plane, but they hadn't seen their work, from their hands, their welding, to actually taking off on a runway. We flew them to Boeing field, and they watched the engine they had made take off on an en- on a plane. And they cried. And we taped it, and we all cried watching it, because it was just this moment of, "I did that. I made that."

And same with the health care workers, the manufacturers who had made an MRI and CT scanner. We brought them together with cancer survivors, who because of that technology had helped them find it earlier. And we brought them together, and it was like, "I make a difference. I did that."

And so it was really just trying to remind people of why do we work? Why are we here? It was as simple as that. But I think in those moments when you're rudderless, when you don't know what the future is, just remind you of why you're here, what you do that matters, uh, is very powerful.

Whitney: Hmm. I got chills again. (laughs) I got chills when I read it, I got chills when you talked about it. It's just so powerful to me, um, of being able to allow people to see their handiwork and how it contributes to the broader community and world. It's just very, very, um, lovely.

Okay. So, here you are. You've now left GE, you've written this lovely book called [\*Imagine it Forward\*](#). Um, what story are you now telling? And- and I have to say it, what good things will Beth Comstock now bring to life?

Beth: You have to, that was a good one, Whitney. Uh, well, couple things. I had intended this, I- I left GE in December. I had, uh, intended this to be a bit of a gap year for me. I was going to wander around, do my discovery of, like, what's next for me? And I jumped into finishing up this book, and it became a much ... I let it become a much bigger job.

So, what's next for me is, um, I am going to go and discover. I think I'm recasting myself as the learner, as the beginner. So, um, just being able to take all the wisdom and experience I've gathered, and try to think new again. Um, and go into situations, and I don't know where that's going to take me. I really don't. Um, so I'm excited to go explore. Um, I'm excited to figure out what's next. So, how do I- what's my story? I'm a beginner. I'm starting all over again, but hopefully a wiser, uh, certainly a more mature, uh, beginner. And, um, and so that's the approach I'm going to take. So, um, you know, if we check in a year from now, hopefully I'll have wandered somewhere new.

Whitney: Hmm. So, you were at the top of a learning curve, and now you've leaped, um, as I think you said in one of your quotes. In fact, I want to just wrap up with this quote. You said, um, uh, "Charging into the unknown optimistically, with all flags flying, is a skill, one to develop," and it's a skill it sounds like that you have, but you're going to continue to develop.

Um, Beth Comstock, thank you so much for being with us today. It's been an absolute pleasure, and I am confident that people will learn a tremendous amount and be inspired. And, best of luck to you on your book.

Beth: Thanks, Whitney. Thanks for taking the time, great conversation. I really appreciate it.

It seems intuitive, but the easiest way to market a product is to solve a customer's problem, whether you are an entrepreneur or a behemoth like GE. Solve a customer's problem. To hear Beth talk about this on a large scale is fascinating. The tilt of a rudder. A big machine to move. If your product people don't have access to a customer, she says, give them access ASAP. It's in sales best interest to give marketing runway. It will help sales in the end. But it's hard to let that go. You can't say "I did this thing." And the wanting to own the customer is probably one of the reasons people don't like sales. If you are smart like a [Dave Meltzer](#) or a [Tiffani Bova](#) (both of whom we've interviewed), it isn't just about the relationship, that's the starting point, but about the problem I, we, you can help your customer solve. That's where we win.

I loved that Beth said, "My success isn't a testament to an improbable succession of good decisions--I've had plenty of failures--but to a bias for action." We all have the power to act. On this topic, if you haven't listened to the [episode with Benjamin Hardy](#), I would do it now.

Finally, I loved her willingness to reflect, to share her struggle, the disruption of self required, in order to be able to do what she's done. This to me is the best kind of business memoir.

Practical tip:

The next time you take on a new role or project, be willing to be a student. Have the confidence to ask for time to get immersed. "I know what I bring to the table. I also know that if I take the time to be at the low-end of the curve, where I don't know things", I will ask the kinds of questions we need to be asking.

If you'd like a copy of Beth's book [\*Imagine it Forward\*](#), please e-mail me at [wj@whitneyjohnson.com](mailto:wj@whitneyjohnson.com) no later than September 22, 2018. We will choose send copies to three of you. Gratis. Our gift to you.

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](http://whitneyjohnson.com/ateam).

Thank you again to Beth Comstock for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributor Emilie Davis and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson  
And this is Disrupt Yourself.