

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 94: BETHANY QUAM

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. Our guest today is Bethany Quam. Bethany is the group president of General Mills Europe and Australia business, a two billion dollar business that serves people in more than 25 countries with beloved brands such as Haagen-Dazs and Cheerios. She just celebrated 25 years at General Mills and is currently based in Nyon, Switzerland.

WHITNEY Welcome to the podcast Bethany.

BETHANY Well, hi Whitney, nice to be with you.

WHITNEY I'd like to start, uh, by asking you a question, of what did you want to be when you grew up, and where did you live when you grew up?

BETHANY Well, I lived in a suburb of, uh, Minneapolis, Minnesota. I grew up with parents, um, two educators. A father who was a professor at the University of Minnesota, and a mom who was trained to be a high school English teacher. So, uh, that's where I grew up.

You know, and I think back on what did I want to be when I grew up, I really have no memory actually of ever declaring I wanted to be a teacher. I think actually, my journey has been and still is, right, figuring out what I wanted to be.

So, I knew I wanted to go to college. I went to Indiana University. I ended up studying in the business school to be a certified public accountant. And as I went on that journey, between my junior and senior year, I had the great fortune of getting an internship.

I am old, so, we used to have the big six, big eight accounting firms, and so I went to work for one of those firms. And as the summer went on, at the end of the summer, the partner offered me a job. So I was going to go back to my senior year in college with a job.

And my parents were very clear I was going to college to get a job, right, not, to find myself.

WHITNEY (Laughs).

BETHANY And then when I got back, I realized that I didn't like the work, but now I was pretty far along and, um, I wasn't sure what I was going to do. So, I decided well, uh, maybe I'll interview with a few other companies, and I want not public accounting firms. So I maybe I'll try finance in something. And I love, you know, you know, shopping and food, food and packaged goods.

And so interviewed with three or four, you know, CPG companies, you know, consumer product goods companies. And I went to work with General Mills, off the college campus, into finance, because I had found that I didn't know that I really wanted to do that accounting work. So, that's the beginning of my 25 years with General Mills.

WHITNEY So, you went to, you went to General Mills straight out of school?

BETHANY I did.

WHITNEY All right, so before we go to your first job at General Mills in finance, how did you pick accounting? I mean, that's ...

BETHANY It's, it's ...

WHITNEY ... Let's, let's be blunt, that was an unusual profession for a girl to pick. So how did you pick accounting?

BETHANY Well, and for an extreme extrovert girl. I mean, the part I didn't tell you about is in the summer, when I was working, I would be in this audit room with all these people, and you'd be in there doing a lot of, you know, I remember like adding things up. And they'd come in and they'd say somebody needs to interview the client. And everybody looked like down at their shoes.

And I could not wait to leave the room. I was like, "Pick me, pick me. Let me interview the clients," 'cause I just wanted to go engage. And I would go to the client, and I'd come back two hours later to the audit room, and they'd be like, "Okay, first of all, you've been gone way too long. And secondly, so, you got everything certified, right? You got the checklist certified."

And I was like, oh, shoot. But I learned so much about their business, right. And so how I ended up picking accounting very, I mean, just very honestly, I was in the business school and it was kind a time when like nobody was getting jobs. I was an aerobics instructor, um, at the Indiana University, and there was an aerobics instructor, and she had like 12 job offers.

And I thought, well, if she can get 12 job offers in accounting, I can do that. And I was very good at it. I got a 4.0 in accounting. I could add across and down. I passed the entire CPA the first time. And so, it was just me again, this journey of not really knowing what I wanted to do. And missing a ton of cues too.

WHITNEY Oh, interesting, okay, so let's go to the cues in just a second. I do ...

BETHANY Yeah.

WHITNEY ... I want to, I want to call out the fact that it was a necessity, right?

BETHANY It was.

WHITNEY Your parents had said, your parents, there was an expectation in your family that you would go to college. There was also the expectation like you said, that you weren't going to college to find yourself, you were going to college to get a trade to be able to support yourself.

And so, you're in a difficult time, you see an aerobics instructor, 12 different jobs offers. You're like, okay, it's accounting for me, right? So the necessity really drove it.

BETHANY Totally.

WHITNEY Okay, now, what were the cues? What were some of the cues that you went by?

BETHANY Well, I totally missed it, now, when I look back and we should keep going on my career, right, 'cause you'll see it unfold. So that started my 25 year, you know, career at General Mills. But I will tell you, I've had 13 jobs at General Mills, 13 jobs, but four careers.

WHITNEY Hmm.

BETHANY And so like well what's a career, right, versus what's a job? And I have found them to be that they were so highly disruptive. You know, I always say I knew less than 10% maybe of the people, and maybe 20% of the business content, even as I was here so long.

And so I mark these as careers, because they were so disruptive, um, for me, versus a slot, a job that was slightly different, but maybe still in sales, but I was in, on a new customer. Well, that's a new job, but it wasn't anywhere near as disruptive.

WHITNEY All right, so, let's go through the four careers. I think our listeners will find this fascinating. So your first career was finance. Talk to us about that.

BETHANY I did a couple of different things within, um, finance over the first two years, and you know, very low level, so just support. And, um, I started in our food service business, and I then moved and worked on, actually worked on the accounting for all of the adult cereals at General Mills. So think of things like Wheaties and Chex Mix.

And I made sure that the marketing leader, you know, spent within his budgets, right. That was my job. And so as I was in finance, right, my first performance review from my first boss at General Mills, the thing comes back, and he says, "Um, you're technically very sound, but too chatty."

WHITNEY (Laughs).

BETHANY And literally wrote that in my performance review. And he, said, you know, finance people are supposed to be more introspective. They're supposed to be, you know, kind of seen and not heard that much, until it's time to drive home the fact that you're off budget. And it, it was another wakeup call a little bit in terms of - I can do this work, but am I truly starting to understand what really drives me, and what I really wanted to do.

WHITNEY Was that one of your cues that you were talking about a minute ago?

BETHANY Yeah, you know, my really big cue was when I look back on my life, I, as a second grader, I was a Girl Scout, and for the first time ever, I was given - go Sell Girl Scout Cookies. And I sold 220 boxes of Girl Scout Cookies, just to, just to win the stuffed horse. I should have figured out a long time ago that I loved food and selling, and external engagement, and it took me quite a while (laughing), to get there.

WHITNEY (Laughs), you were seven years old? Okay, that is an important cue.

BETHANY Yeah, but I totally missed it, right? And then I went to, to become a certified public accountant. And so my first job was, you know, finance, and was still kind of searching, especially on the technically sound, but too chatty.

WHITNEY Well, what did you do when your boss said you're too chatty? Like how did that feel? How did that feel?

BETHANY It, well, it felt terrible, right? Because it was this trying to, I wasn't fitting into the box that I was supposed to fit in. And so even though I was technically really good, just like technically getting a 4.0 in, in accounting, and passing your CPA all of it the first time. Right, that's technically sound.

WHITNEY Yeah.

BETHANY But trying to fit into the box. And so, I was struggling, I was looking left and looking right, and trying to figure out, okay, I need to look more like the person to my left, you know, or the person to my right. And so then I actually drove the second career. I think, I don't, and I had only been there two years, right, but I knew who I deeply loved what General Mills did.

But I wanted to get closer. I wanted to closer to, you know, the consumer, the customer, you know, where it was really happening. I was, it kind of felt like I was keeping score versus driving the score maybe. So ...

WHITNEY Hmm, right, right. You were the statistician and you wanted to be in the game.

BETHANY I did, but I didn't totally understand that, right. And so, how did it happen? So, 23 years ago, for a finance person, I saw the first couple of people in marketing at General Mills go out into a sales rotation, and they were going to go for six months, 'cause they wanted marketers to understand a little bit more about sales.

And again, I was so kind of young and new, I thought, well, maybe I could do that. I didn't really realize that was kind of a program that had been designed for people within marketing, right. So I came forward and I asked. I had a wonderful, wonderful boss, and I told her what I was kind of interested in.

WHITNEY What was her name? What was her name? Let's give her a shout out.

BETHANY Yeah, Mary Jo Ekman. And I brought it forward to her, and I said, "I want to go out and have a non-headquarters experience," right, and I wanted to kind of be more where, um, I didn't even know. I said I, I didn't even know exactly what sales was. I mean, at all, right?

WHITNEY (Laughs).

BETHANY [crosstalk 00:11:40].

WHITNEY But I want to go somewhere where I can chat?

BETHANY Yeah, chat, right? And also, this is one of the things I learned early on though, I knew that there was going to be what I call a give and a get, right. I, I wanted to get something. I wanted to learn more about General Mills. I wanted to learn more about the customer, but what was in it for General Mills?

I came forward and I said I'll go anywhere in the country, anywhere. And I'll go for at least a year, was, the other people on the marketing rotation were out for six months. And I couldn't understand what were they going to give back in six months.

WHITNEY Uh.

BETHANY That plan to me looked like a take only. So I said I'd go anywhere in the country and I would go for longer. And so, I got, you know, I was lucky to be, you know, supported. And so I went to Cleveland Ohio. I was sure that was I was going to Northern Cal or Southern

Cal, I was like 24 years old and, you know, I thought, but I went to Cleveland, and it was a great experience.

It wasn't what I was thinking when I said I'd go anywhere in the country. And I learned just an incredible amount. It's probably what started my path on this disruption and learning that when you're the most uncomfortable, you're actually growing the most.

WHITNEY Hmm, yeah. So you went to your boss, and you've gotten this performance review. You're feeling like this isn't quite working. You find out about these rotations and so you go to your then boss, or to a different boss?

BETHANY I had a different boss by then, not technically sound, but too chatty.

WHITNEY Okay.

BETHANY Um, I, I had a different boss. I had rotated a lot and she was in finance but she supported me enough to say, "Yeah, why not, let me, let me make a call. Why don't you ..." And I ended up going talking to the, you know, VP of sales. You know, I'd never met him. I, you know, I went to talk to him and ...

WHITNEY Okay.

BETHANY ... told them what I wanted, that I, what I was interested in. I literally at the time, I think General Mills had 21 sales officers across the U.S. like we probably have five today. So when I said I would go anywhere, um, and he, right, took a chance on me.

He told his leader, you know, in Cleveland, "I've got somebody for you," right. And so the person who was running the Cleveland office, um, he said, "Okay, but I want to meet her. I said I'd take a marketing person. You know, who's this finance person?"

WHITNEY (Laughs). Yeah.

BETHANY Right? And so I went out there. I thought I was going out there to meet the people, see the office, and I, actually he started interviewing me.

WHITNEY Oh.

BETHANY And I thought I kind of had it, right. And so I was like, oh, straighten up sister, right, you're being interviewed. And I told them what I was interested, you know, again and so many, so many supportive p- managers. By the end of this conversation with him, we had it in the airport, you know, at the Red Lobster. I never even left the airport.

By the end he told me, you're never going to leave sales. And I said, "Oh, I, I don't know, we'll see, I think I'm on a cross functional." And I did 18 years in sales.

WHITNEY Wow (laughs), okay.

BETHANY You know, with him.

WHITNEY And thus begins career two.

BETHANY Yep, absolutely.

WHITNEY All right, okay. So, what do we need to know about career two? Any really highlights of career two? And, and then how did you go to ca- career three?

BETHANY So, tons of highlights. So I would say what I started to learn early on is that everything is in growth or decay. Your mind, your body, your business. And if you want to stay in growth, right, you have to do something. That the natural state of things are actually more, um, decay and the disruption and the uncomfortableness, I'll never forget, you know, my first couple of sales calls and appointments, and how nervous I was on that Sunday night. And like practicing.

I'm going to try to sell them. I'll never forget, Reese's Peanut Butter Puff Cereal. I'm going to sell them Reese's Peanut Butter Puff Cereal, and what if they don't want it, and how am I going to deal with the objections, and, and practicing that stuff. And as I went through sales, oh, now your stomach doesn't hurt anymore, right? You're really good at it, you've done it, so you better make yourself uncomfortable again, right, when you start to get really comfortable. You got to break yourself into it again. So I just learned so much through sales.

I'd also say that in sales you get to, I got such an opportunity to get into large leadership roles early on, right, 'cause you get a lot of sales people. You're managing territories, - there's times in sales where I was what I would call very narrow and deep, and there's times that I was really broad and shallow. And learning how to do that, you know, if you're out calling on a big, big customer, you know, you're more involved in that one. If you're managing a territory that has 25 customers, you're really just leading the people.

WHITNEY Yeah.

BETHANY Right? And then I started to learn how much I could learn from others also too.

WHITNEY Uh.

BETHANY And so, I'd say that's the biggest gift in sales I got, was, um, kind of learning through what I call the gift of feedback.

WHITNEY Oh, okay. Tell, tell us more about that.

BETHANY So the gift of feedback, right, all feedback is a gift, because someone chose to share something with you, and I always say, you can decide later if that feedback sits with other things that you've heard, or your own self-reflection. You know, but it's like, my, I tell my two girls that when you give a gift, you know, in the moment you always say thank you so much for the gift. And then later you can figure out if those socks match your wardrobe.

WHITNEY Hmm.

BETHANY I think that's true with feedback and so I, um, I have a very distinct memory of feedback in sales. Again, I was calling, my team and I were in charge of General Mills third and fourth largest customers. Um, super travel. I had a three year old, a six month old, and I was traveling absolutely everywhere. And as I came in the office, I was moving fast, probably giving a lot of orders.

I had a wonderful administrative assistant and, uh, she shared, you know, at times it's, I feel it's almost aggressive, right. The, and I just couldn't believe it. I was horrified that I had made somebody feel, you know, not valued, or, um, put them kind of on their heels, right, versus feeling welcomed and engaged.

And I couldn't believe it, my, my stomach hurt. And she told me on a Friday, and over the weekend, it's all I thought about.

WHITNEY Hmm.

BETHANY And so the gift of feedback though was I really reflected, right, why am I showing up in a way that I don't think of myself as, or, um, and I just, I was so busy, right, trying to be a good mom, a worker, a wife, right. I wasn't taking care of myself, and I was tired and stressed out. And this administrative assistant was taking the brunt of it.

WHITNEY Right.

BETHANY And so, I started to learn, right, really, when you start to lead a lot of people, I started to learn this concept of how we say if somebody says at the dinner table, my boss, something really good or really bad is about to follow. If you choose to talk about your boss at the dinner table, you don't say, "My boss wore a blue shirt." I like, I would hope people would say, "My boss wore great shoes that day." But they don't.

WHITNEY Right.

BETHANY And they either say something that either made them feel amazing, and they just can't wait to contribute more, or you said that something that made them feel like a zero. And "I'm not sure I want to work for her anymore." And so, it was such a gift, and I just realized this leading with intentionality ...

WHITNEY I guess two questions is ...

BETHANY Yeah.

WHITNEY ... how far along in your career were you at this point in sales? So ...

BETHANY Uh, I mean, I ...

WHITNEY 10 years in?

BETHANY At least, I had two kids, right. So ...

WHITNEY Okay.

BETHANY I'm 15, I'm 12 years now, 15, total at General Mills.

WHITNEY So what did you, so once you got that feedback, what did you do differently? When she gave it to you, did you say, "Thank you very much." And then what did you do differently? Uh, what, what behavior changes did you make immediately as a consequence of that?

BETHANY Well, you know, the hard part, well, is she didn't tell me. She told somebody else.

WHITNEY Oh.

BETHANY And it was just heartbreaking. That's why it hurt so bad, I think too. And so, then it came to me. Luckily, I just had people around me, you know, I, I think who knew maybe that wasn't me. (Laughs).

WHITNEY Yeah.

BETHANY And they knew that, that I could be, they could give me the feedback. Listen I got to tell you, you know, what, what's going on here. And so, I, again had to internalize it (laughs). You know, I had to spend some time with it.

And then I, I just was honest and open, and I told her, "I have heard that you had some feedback and first of all, I, I want to tell you that I'm sorry. I never meant to make you feel that way. Let's talk about it, right. Let's talk about it." Um, this is for me, I told my boss, right.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BETHANY So I talked about it and it helped me really think about intentionality as a leader. What you say - everybody knows, everybody's heard, right, that the shadow of a leader is big.

WHITNEY Yeah.

BETHANY And so, internalizing that and be much more intentional. Now, it does not mean that I don't give tough feedback, right, but I'm going to do it intentionally. It's not going to be, you know, through the hallway, quick, you know, sidebar, not clear - it's going to be intentional.

WHITNEY Right, yeah, right, there's a, there's a difference.

BETHANY And so is the good feedback.

WHITNEY Hmm.

BETHANY I always say the gift of feedback is actually in the why. You can say to employees super fast, "Good job." Or you actually give the gift of good job, because ...

WHITNEY Hmm, so, so Bethany, let's talk about that. Before we go back to your career two, and how you navigated through that and what you did next. Let's just have one a, a little bit more on this, 'cause I think this was really interesting. Talk a little bit about maybe in the last, um, last year or two, more recently on what you do to deliver feedback, uh, both constructive or cons- well, I guess it's all constructive.

Where people aren't doing what they need to be doing, what do you do? And where people are doing what they need to be doing? How do you construct it? What does that conversation look like? Let's be very tactical for just a minute.

BETHANY Yeah, well, I think first of all, you have to go from a base of caring. If it's positive or, or constructive - 'cause I care, I want to give you that feedback, right? So I think you have to go to a base of, of, of trust to show that you care. I also think the more than you can coach through it is what I try to do.

And so, let me give you a, a couple of examples, right. You know, having an employee and you see them do something, um, you know, I'm going to go positive first, then I'll give you the constructive. But really in that moment, watching them and then taking the time. You know, I usually write it down, like I, right, I use One Note. I keep a list of all the people who work for me, and I will just jot it down, like that was amazing. I just saw him really simplify that conversation. The team's been talking for 30 minutes. Nobody knew exactly, you know, what we were going to do, and I just saw you as a leader - you listened, and then you were really clear.

You said, "Okay, what are we going to do? You know, who's going to do it by when?" And I've got a great guy who works with me all the time. He says, what's, you know, what are

we going to do, who's going to do it, by when? And so, then I give them that feedback, right, and I give them some specifics.

Again, if I tell you, good job, or I say, "You were great in that meeting." Well, I want to tell you what I thought was great, so you can do it again.

WHITNEY Right, right, right. Okay, so that's the positive. It sounds like it might be the same when it's something that wasn't positive.

BETHANY It's, it's exactly the same. First it's from a base of caring, right. Um, and then it's from let me give you the se- you know, specific example. It doesn't help just to tell people, you know, um, something with, uh, not enough, um, you know, details, so they can then, um, start to reflect on it, break it down. Often you tell somebody, you know what, in that moment, I, you missed an opportunity to lead.

You were in a team meeting, um, and your team was looking for you to lead, and here's how I saw it, right, three times trying to clarify. It wasn't getting clarified. You didn't step in and clarify, and then everybody just kind of left frustrated. And then if I give him an example, then they'll say, "Oh, well, I was trying to let them be accountable."

Or, "I was, you know," and so, it's really talking to the examples. I always say 95% of employees show up on Monday and they, no one shows up, I don't believe in the beginning of the week and say, "This is the week that I'm going to let down a coworker, you know, um disappoint a customer, or make an employee feel bad." I just don't think, um, that ...

WHITNEY (Laughs).

BETHANY ... I'm just blessed to work with people who don't start their week like that.

WHITNEY Oh, yeah, I think that's a safe assumption, right?

BETHANY So, so something happens.

WHITNEY Hmm.

BETHANY And so, it's being willing to talk about it, and work through it, and coach through it. My job as a leader now is to coach, to coach people through - ask more questions, right, tell me more.

WHITNEY Okay, fantastic. That, that's a wonderful, uh, tutorial, and I think people are going to find this really, really valuable.

So what I want to do now Bethany is we, uh, we talked about first career. We start, talked about second career. Can you talk for how long you were in second career, and characterize that briefly. And then what did you start feeling, thinking, doing that moved you into your third career?

BETHANY So I, um, ended up having a long sale, you know, long time in sales, right. Different customers, in different geographies, um, but it was almost ...

WHITNEY Give me some examples of like customers and geographies, just so the people can put a name to a face.

BETHANY So I had the great pleasure of working, um, with, um, uh, you know, a lot of our really big customers in the U.S., you know, representing General Mills' products across all of our

business lines, right. So, in the U.S., General Mills is almost in 24 categories, so cereal, soup, yogurt.

And I've worked with Costco and Sam's and Target and Dollar General and Walgreens, and in my last job, um, in sales was, you know, the vice president of all of our, what we would call channels. So everything that wasn't, uh, a grocery store or a Walmart. So a huge part of, um, General Mills' business.

And so I had a huge opportunity in sales and, great growth, moved a lot. Really started wanting, you know, from a deep place of always wanting General Mills to serve their consumers and customers, and you know, win in the marketplace.

And then wanting to stretch out now of sales, and seeing that I could have more impact, and I wanted to see more business levers.

WHITNEY Hmm.

BETHANY I wanted to get, I wanted to get my hands on the P&L. Um, so, kind of getting back maybe to the finance coming together with sales, and wanting to know that, hmm, I want to get this outcome. I want to be able to play more levers. I want to be able to push and pull. And so then stepping into a, a true general management role. And leaving sales, so this is third career.

WHITNEY Yeah.

BETHANY Um, and going to run General Mills', um, we call our convenience and food service business. So now going from, no, really going to a B2B, a business to business,

WHITNEY How does that happen? How did you go from B, you know, to B?

BETHANY So, you know, career one and career two, I would say I drove more of those, right. I started with General Mills. I drove the switch into sales. Career three was more about being really clear about what, I started to understand that it wasn't about the job, you know, what do you want to be when you grow up, it was more about, what drives my energy.

WHITNEY Hmm.

BETHANY And starting to articulate to my boss and mentors what drove my energy, and getting clear that I love to learn. And when I'm learning, it's all good. That I love to lead, that I want to lead, you know, teams of people, and I want to have an impact, right, I want to leave the campsite better than I found it, right. I, I want ...

WHITNEY I love that, (laughs). I've never heard that before.

BETHANY ... [crosstalk 00:31:30] I want, I wanted a flower to grow, right, either with somebody or in the business, right. Growth for, um, impact for me is also how I impact the people as well as how I impact the business.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BETHANY And so, I started telling my boss this, "Listen, what I'm driven by is learning, leading and ensuring that I leave the campsite of General Mills always better. The people, the business." And I said, "I, I am interested in where I can a broader impact on the people and the business of General Mills."

And, I, I didn't name necessarily this exact job, but I started to say, maybe in things that look like this. I, I give you that piece advice too, helping your boss understand what you're

interested in is super important. And then sometimes telling them - this is what I see it in. And you can give them examples of, you know, two to three jobs. But tell him why those are interesting, and then say to them, "What do you see?"

WHITNEY Hmm.

BETHANY Versus necessarily saying - I want that one job. Sometimes it's important to call that shot, but sometimes it's more important to say, "This is what I'm motivated by. I see it in this kind of opportunities, what do you think?"

WHITNEY Wow, that's what you did?

BETHANY Yeah.

WHITNEY Okay, every single person listening that feels like you are at the top of your learning curve, listen to what Bethany just said. She, that's the formula. So repeat it one more time Bethany, 'cause I think it's super powerful.

BETHANY You know, well, I think you have to be, first you got to know what motivates you.

WHITNEY Hmm.

BETHANY So you got to say, "This is what I'm motivated by." Right, and for me, it'd be different for everyone, but really clear. "I love to learn, I love to lead, and I want to make a big impact on the business and people of General Mills. And so, I see that in these two to three different jobs, and this is why I see it, because they're, they, they cover a whole P&L, they lead a lot of people. But you probably have a better view than I do even, where else do you see it?"

And then, career three was, you know, starting to lead the away from home, which is the business to business, right. And so, he is the one, right, you know, who saw that, and started to say, "Huh, maybe that would make sense." And so then I, you know, I started to run our away from home business. Um, just a, an amazing job. I, I ...

WHITNEY What do you mean, sorry, just to clarify, what do you mean when, 'cause I don't know the, the industry you've been going ...

BETHANY Our business to business field, yeah, [crosstalk 00:34:19].

WHITNEY ... the away from home, like what's the away from home.

BETHANY Yeah, so, okay, let me do a comeback. So then I started to lead our, uh, business where it's actually more of a business to business, so it's when you see General Mills cereals in a hospital, in a school, um, on an airline, right, so you're selling more to that business, who then gets in front of the consumer.

WHITNEY Got it.

BETHANY You know, versus, you know, the core of General Mills, right, is a business to consumer, and the consumer, we create the connection with the consumer, where you would work through somebody.

WHITNEY Got it, okay, so in that new job, so the prior job, how many people were you leading?

BETHANY I probably got over a, over a hundred. This job, the one I went to when you're a, a full general manager. You know, if you count, I mean 700, if you count all the people in the plants, thousands.

WHITNEY You now have an actual P&L. Is that correct? Okay.

BETHANY Ab, absolutely, (laughs), absolutely.

WHITNEY All right. What, what was one of the big lessons that you learned in that role?

BETHANY Oh gosh, two amazing things. Again, when you get into these bigger roles, being super intentional. So now you have people working for you who actually do sales, they do marketing, they do finance, they, they do, you know, supply chain operations, right. And now, your job right, is to actually, be the general manager of that, and not go narrow and deep, right.
But ensure that one plus one equals three. And you're, you're helping set the strategic intent - what are we trying to do? One of my favorite lines when you're, you know, with that group was being really clear about - how do we know when to have the party?

WHITNEY Oh.

BETHANY And I always say ...

WHITNEY (Laughs), okay, say more, that's interesting.

BETHANY ... the party is for the big things, right. You launched a first to market product that reached a thousand kids, you know, in their first week in a school. That's a party! A first to market to launch that's really nourishing a whole bunch of kids, right. Or you won the vendor, the supplier of the year award with Cisco, the number one distributor of food service.

Those are the big, "how do you know when you have the party," and getting the team to be setting really big goals. I always say you don't have the party for the Excel spreadsheet that you did perfect.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BETHANY The parties, I always say that the game is being played outside. With our consumers, our customers, right. Being an employer of choice, and what happens in this conference room today better be advancing really something with the consumer, the customer, you know, or making you an employer of choice.

And so, you know, you start to lead a big team like that. You want to be really clear that first of all you're setting big enough goals. And when you say, "How do you know when to have the party?" It's a really engaging and inspiring way. Um and people start to dream big.

WHITNEY So, hmm, so was that, was it, I suppose going from sales, I mean, when you worked sales, you were a sales manager at that point ... I always think it's an interesting challenge that people have going from an individual contributor to a leader.

BETHANY Yeah, I was a total sales leader by then, yeah.

WHITNEY Yeah, okay, so you didn't have that challenge at that point, you were already in a position where you were getting things done through other people. Not, not the, oh, I'm not, I'm not generating revenue anymore, okay, interesting, okay.

So you, all right, so you really, it sounds like in that role, you started to really refine how you're going to lead people, and what that looks like, and how do you motivate people, and help them prepare to have the party. Is that accurate?

BETHANY Absolutely, like being really clear on your strategic attempt and strategic intent. What is the ...

WHITNEY Yeah.

BETHANY ... you know, and I would, if I say to you, um, strategic intent or, um, those sound like big business words sometimes, and trying to engage. I learned in that job so well how you had to know when to engage, the head, right, the strategic thinking, when to use your heart, right, to really inspire them. Or when to use your hands, and ...

WHITNEY Interesting, what's the hands piece?

BETHANY The hands, the hands are what are you, what are you actually doing? Right, when you talk about going from an individual leader to a, you know, an individual contributor or leader, right. You have to know that actually most, you're using probably, you know, more of your head, right. You're, you're grabbing the hearts, and you're selective on when you're using your actual hands, um, to do the work.

Right, my hands are used to coach, develop, big customer meetings, um, today approving big capital investments, right. The stuff I'm really doing, but it's this combination of head, heart, hands ...

WHITNEY Hmm.

BETHANY ... um, that I really got to understand more.

WHITNEY So you, you loved that work?

BETHANY Loved that work.

WHITNEY Let's go to career four.

BETHANY Yeah, so career four, so I'm running this, you know, general manager of this big business. I love what I'm doing, I love the, the just the work, the, the teams. Um, uh, and I started to have this experience, um, where I had people start asking me about sharing, a little bit about my career and coaching and ... So someone showed up at my office and they said, "We'd like you to be the keynote at our women in marketing events." And I said, "Well, I can't be the keynote. I'm internal, right, I'm the cheap notes."

WHITNEY (Laughs).

BETHANY Keynotes are paid, right, (laughing). I'm already being paid, but and why I'm telling you this was that word spurred me to write down actually, you know, what do I kind of think and my belief in this driving growth for yourself, you know, for each other, and for the business. And it made me really step back and reflect, and so I started sharing this with people.

I shared, you know, shared it with, you know, in a couple of big conferences, and I started talking about - if you're not uncomfortable, right, then you're not pushing yourself hard enough. Right, and I started talking about, you know, when is the last time you did

something for the first time? And if you can't say today, you know, at least this week, you know, then you're not pushing.

And I'm telling everybody this, and I've been with General Mills 23 years in the U.S. right, (laughing), and I have two teenage daughters, and I start thinking about two things. One is - I'm getting comfortable, and the second one is I wanted to start to give my girls the gift of growth, and the gift of uncomfortable.

So when my husband and I told two teenage girls that they were going to move 5000 miles from home, they were going to live in a country that it was not their native language. They were going to show up at school on January 7th and know nobody. Be at a English speaking school but there was two Americans, you know, in my 13 years, 13 year old's class. Their stomach, that uncomfortable feeling was going to be real.

WHITNEY Hmm.

BETHANY But I just knew that it was such a, to help them understand this, disrupting yourself is actually so exciting, so positive, and it opens up your world to things ... My, my girls are becoming citizens of world right now.

WHITNEY Wow, wow.

BETHANY And that's, that's what drove it, was this great desire to live my words, don't get comfortable. To give my girls, the gift of growth, and put them on that path.

WHITNEY So how did the job happen? So, you're having, you're saying these words out loud in front of all these people, and you're thinking, "Oh, dear, Bethany, I've got to walk my talk." How did the job, how did this opportunity to be in, in Switzerland come about?

BETHANY I was already running one of our five, run, running one of our five segments, right, I'm now running another one.

WHITNEY Uh-huh.

BETHANY And so, um, there was some movements, right, some people, there were some movement and I really started to think about it, 'cause I would say prior to that, you know, my husband had a dual career. Um, we want to probably put ourselves as internationally mobile. You know, some things started to change for my husband. He was ready to maybe do something different, and I, I went forward and had a conversation. And said, you know, I, um, going back to I love to learn, I want to lead big teams and I want to have a great impact on General Mills. And if you believe that I could have a great impact internationally, um, I'm open. I hadn't been open before, so I wanted you to know that I'm, we call it globally mobile.

WHITNEY (Laughs).

BETHANY And so, um, I shared that I was globally mobile and interested. Um, and if it works for General Mills, I was interested. And so, again, that, you know, I told you out of the, out of the times I changed careers, sometimes I've led them, sometimes they've pushed me, right.

This was definitely going forward and saying, "I love what I'm doing, I love where I'm at, however, if I can learn, lead and have a great impact on the people and the business of General Mills, and you think that's right for me now, count me in."

WHITNEY And then it happened?

BETHANY Yeah.

WHITNEY So, it's interesting, you say that you've been pushed, but, uh, it sounds like within the big strokes of your career, um, most of the time you have driven them, at least for career two, three and four. You've been very much, very proactive in, uh, making sure, using this S-Curve as learning, obviously, you didn't do that, but I'm using my language.

BETHANY Oh, it's totally right.

WHITNEY You can get it clear of like okay, I'm at the top of a curve, I need to jump to a new curve. How do I set this up so that I can jump to a new curve in a way that's good for you, but is clear in terms of the benefits to General Mills. And so it's really helpful.

BETHANY Absolutely, you have to be really, you know you, you know you have to be very clear. And I think that's also, again, talking about what you're motivated by, and what you see it in, in what, where you could add value. I didn't, you know, necessarily name that job, right? Sometimes I'd say, but most of the time it was about, I'm interested in this, how could that work? Right, General Mills is really good. Every, you know, very structured on making sure that we're having good conversations with our employees. And, you know, we have an engaging leader, what we call behavior map, and really being, you know, what we call fostering continuous growth, right. Helping people continue to grow.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BETHANY You know, one of the things I think, Whitney, that I challenge on is that if you want to, you don't have to leave the company to jump to a new S curve.

WHITNEY Yeah, yeah, so as we wrap up, I think I'd like to ask you two final questions - for people who are inside of an organization that are saying to themselves, it's time for me to do something new. What advice would you give to them? If you had to give them, you know, where it's time to do something new, and they love their corporation, they love their organization, they don't want to leave. If you could distill it down to a couple piece of advice you would give to them. If I came to you and said, "This is what I'm trying to do Bethany."

BETHANY First of all, I would make sure that you're having the conversation.

WHITNEY Okay.

BETHANY Right, I think that a lot of employees have a lot of conversations in their head ...

WHITNEY (Laughs).

BETHANY ... and they, and they assume that we as managers and leaders know that. And so I would say have the conversation, and talk again about what you're motivated by, where do you think you add skill. But where are you where do you want to know more?

One of the moves that you can one was being really clear that I was, um, what I call, you know, a mile wide but an inch deep. I wasn't running lots and lots of people in teams, but I wanted to actually go more narrow and deep. And I wanted to be, I want those big customers where every call was worth 20 millions dollars, right. And I, I told my boss that. I wanted to go narrow and deep, right, so tell him where you thought you needed more skill, 'cause I'd watched a peer of mine present, and I was like, "Oh gosh, we are not doing anywhere the near the same job." Right, he is a sales director, but he's super narrow and

deep. I'm a sales director, but I'm super broad and shallow. I better get that skill of narrow and deep.

And so, I would tell employees talk to your managers, tell them what you're interested in. Tell him what you're motivated by first, you know. You know, engage in the conversation. Also understand though that this is a, you know, give / get, right. What are you looking to give, what are you looking to get. Um ...

WHITNEY So it sounds like that to me is like one of the most powerful pieces of advice is the give / get. So here's what I'm trying to get, but here's what it's going to give to you as an organization, which I think is that is a, a piece of the equation that we oftentimes omit.

BETHANY For sure, and as a manager, if somebody comes into my office and says, "You know, here's what I'm interested," it's kind of sales 101, right. We need people, you know, you're very aware of what I call my point of view. I know what my point of view is. I know I want this skill, this job, right, but what's your, what's your other person's point of view?

What's your, what's your leader trying to accomplish? And how do you, or what's your organization trying to accomplish? You know, how do you line those things up so you can do that?

WHITNEY Yeah, uh, super powerful. Okay, last question for today is, um, what are you going to do to disrupt yourself in the next six months? It can be personally, it could be professionally, I realize you're a publicly traded company, so you might be circumscribed in what you can actually say, so it might need to be personal.

But what's something that you're going to do to make yourself, I loved what you said earlier on, you said, disrupting yourself looks like you know less than 10% of the people, and 20% of the content. What's something you're going to do to challenge yourself in the next few months?

BETHANY I love to think about it both personally and professionally. Um, and, so one of the things, well, Whit- Whitney I'm disrupting myself today. I have never done a podcast until today.

WHITNEY Oh, how fun.

BETHANY Today I disrupt myself, um, and so ...

WHITNEY Really? (laughs), I'm glad that I get to be the person to help you, be the disruptor.

BETHANY Yeah, well, you know, honestly, podcasts came into my life from living internationally. Because I couldn't listen to the radio anymore, because it was all in French, and I speak, you know, I don't speak French. I speak Franglish, a little bit of French, a little bit of English.

WHITNEY (Laughs).

BETHANY And so, I started to listen to podcasts every morning, and then I started to listen to, to just learn something new every morning. Um, and just a little nugget, um, and so, um, in terms of disrupting myself in the next six months, um, well, personally, I'm going to go to South Africa. We're going to take a trip to South Africa. I've never been there, and so we're going to do a vacation to South Africa.

And professionally, I'm going to, um, uh, I'm going to do a large speaking engagement in March with the Women in Food Service Forum. Uh, so that's a, like I think there's

thousands there, so a good disruption there, um, on the speaking engagement. And then, you know, um, for my business, I'm just having so much fun understanding international business.

And the biggest advice I have on international business is you know, always understanding - there's so many similarities. Like people at the core in food want to help, want you to help make their lives healthier, easier, you know, or more fulfilled, right, richer. And so I see consumers wanting the similar things. But then as you work in different countries, you have to understand the difference that matters.

WHITNEY Hmm.

BETHANY And so continuing to get really good at, you know, starting with the similarities and being really tight on the difference that matters. Not every difference, right, what matters. And so, I'm just really looking forward to just getting better at that in different, different countries that, um, we haven't maybe cracked. Right, like ...

WHITNEY Right, so you're right in the middle? It sounds like you're right in the middle of figuring out how to do international, and you're in 25 countries. That's a lot of learning to do from a cultural perspective, right?

BETHANY Totally, like you know, we're really good in, you know, France and, uh, Australia, um, in the UK, but I, um, I got a, you know, a leader running our, a bunch of other countries, and we've been talking about, you know, Poland and just doing things different, uh, in different countries. Um, you know, I truly believe in the passion. I'm passionate, right, about serving the world, you know, about making food people love, and there's a lot of world to go, and a lot of people ...

WHITNEY Hmm.

BETHANY ... um, that can love.

WHITNEY That's a, yeah, that's a lovely way to end our conversation is, um, so Bethany Quam, thank you so much. I'm so excited that this is the very first podcast interview you've done. It's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you for letting me disrupt you, and thank you for sharing all of your advice and wisdom.

I, I, I really believe that people are going to find this incredibly valuable, because there are so many people that love their organizations, that love their companies, they don't want to leave, and your advice on how to navigate that, and be able to continually reinvent some of your own new learning curves every three years, I think will be incredibly valuable. So thank you again.

BETHANY Thank you Whitney. Thank you for the work you do. I, you know, I've learned, I, I have learned a lot. It helped me structure the thinking even on this S curves, um, and where, where I really think all of my people are at on it, where I'm at on it, where my kids are at on it.

You know, and also understanding that people's S curves might look a little different. You know, on this international move, one of my daughters, it's taken her a lot longer up the S curve. That a lot is disruption, but man, is she on fire now.

WHITNEY Hmm.

BETHANY And so people come into different, everybody's S curves aren't the same size of S.

WHITNEY Well, I agree, and with that, we will say thank you everyone for listening, and again, Bethany, thank you.

BETHANY Thanks.

Such a fascinating journey! Many of you have shared that you'd like to be more innovative with your career, but you don't want to leave your current job. Bethany's story is a fantastic example of how self-awareness and motivation can lead you down a path of disruption within your current organization.

And if you're feeling stuck, look to your childhood for your strengths --- for Bethany, it was in the Girl Scout cookies. Following those cookie crumbs. She loves food, she loves people, she loves leading. Now remember boss who said. You're technically sound, but you are too chatty. He didn't give her a why. How much more powerful could it have been if that boss had said, "You're technically sound, but you seem to be more interested in engaging with customers than in crunching number which is telling me that..." Brené Brown teaches in her new book that leaders should always work to be clear. Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind. Unclear feedback leaves our employees in a place of shame. The gift is in the why.

Another fantastic point from Bethany - Everything is in growth or decay. Natural state is a state of decay. If you want to stay in growth, you have to do something. If you aren't actively moving up the roller coaster hill of your S-curve, even incrementally, like we talked about with James Clear---you are sliding down.

Practical tip:

Think about something you LOVED to do when you were a child. If your current role doesn't leverage this strength, how can you tweak it so that it does?

If you are wondering if it's time to not just tweak but to change roles, in addition to Bethany's great advice, we've got a free PDF with 10 questions to ask yourself. The link is on whitneyjohnson.com in the show notes, or you can download it by visiting whitneyjohnson.com/10questions

Thank you again to Bethany Quam for being our guest, thank you to manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Libby Newman, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.