

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 117: SARAH GREEN CARMICHAEL

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption.

Starting off at the low end of a learning curve can bring so many emotions to the surface, and when we've worked our way up the curve, we don't often remember how hard it was to do the things that now come easily. Because of this, I always love talking to people at the low end or launch point of their S Curve of learning.

Today's episode is a two-part conversation with my former editor at Harvard Business Review, Sarah Green Carmichael. At the end of 2018, she left her role as Executive Editor at HBR which is when we recorded the first half of this interview.

Whitney: Welcome to the podcast, Sarah.

Sarah: Thank you so much for having me, Whitney.

Whitney: Let's start by having you tell us a little bit about you. Where did you grow up, and what did you want to be when you grew up?

Sarah: I grew up in Massachusetts. And I knew very early on, probably in high school, that I wanted to be a writer. And probably a journalist.

Whitney: That's unusual. Usually people don't know what they want to do. Are you surprised, when you look back now?

Sarah: You know, it's funny. Um, it is unusual, and I always felt lucky that there was something I very clearly wanted to do.

I think, something that, that ended up surprising me was that I always assumed I would want to go into like, political journalism. And I, I did for a couple of years, um. My first job out of college was focused on that. And it really surprised me when I got into business journalism and ended up finding that really interesting. I never would have expected that.

Whitney: What's your first job out of college?

Sarah: So my first job out of college, I was super excited to get. Um, it was one of those moments where, I really, I applied for only two jobs. This was the second job I applied for. And I just knew I wanted it. And I was, um, a research assistant for a syndicated op-ed columnist. Uh, her name is Ellen Goodman. She's retired now, but, uh, for many, many years, she was one of the most syndicated women in America. And wrote a pretty feminist, um, left-leaning op-ed column, heavily focused on politics but also occasionally focused on culture and other issues.

And coming out of college, I, like, wanted to be, you know, a syndicated columnist like Maureen Dowd or Ellen Goodman, or one of these people. So, get, having a chance to really see her life up close, and work with her and learn from her, was just like a dream come true.

Whitney: How did you get that job? I'm always curious, and I think a lot of our listeners are curious. Either for themselves or for their children, how did you go about getting that particular job?

Sarah: Yeah, so this is one of those things that is kind of a scary story if you're a parent, probably. Cause you just think, oh God, you know, don't give that advice. But I had (laughter) ...

Whitney: Okay, everyone, warning. Warning, don't listen to about what she's about to say. But tell us anyway, Sarah.

Sarah: Yeah, okay. So my senior year in college, everyone was freaking out about graduation and jobs, and I thought to myself, "I don't want to ruin my senior year by worrying about this. I'm not going to worry about it until I graduate. I'm not going to apply for jobs, I'm not going to think about jobs. I'm just going to live my life."

Um, and so, really almost at the end of my senior year, uh, my roommate walked in. And just said, "Oh, I was looking at the, you know, the job, the university job board. And I saw a posting, and it was anonymous." It didn't have Ellen's name in the posting. It just said, you know, "Op-ed columnist seeks researcher," um, with a little tiny bit of information. You know, please send resume and cover letter.

So, I thought, "Oh, that's interesting. You know, I'll throw my hat in the ring." It was totally chance that my roommate happened to see it, and happened to mention it to me. Um, I sent in my information. And when I got the callback, that's when I learned that it was, that it was Ellen. Um, whose writing I had been familiar with, whose, um, kind of views aligned with my own. I was, I was afraid it was going to be someone who really had opinions that I, you know, didn't want to support. And so, but I was like, well, could be a good job anyway. You know, so maybe I should just do it.

So, it was just a tremendous lucky break. And um, I hadn't really been looking for a job. And, you know, now, being older and wiser, I think like, oh, that was a big risk. Uh, but it all worked out. So, um, I got really lucky.

Whitney: Huh. Little bit of serendipity there.

Sarah: Yeah. And I think, I think it helped that I was the right person for that job, you know. I had put in my time at the college paper. I had written columns at the college paper. I had been, you know, working on issues and, and studying things in college that aligned with what Ellen was looking for.

So, it's one of those things where, I, you know, now also as someone who's hired other people, I think, "Oh yeah, if I saw 22-year-old Sarah coming through the pipeline, and, and me being who I am, I could see why she wanted to hire me."

But you know, it was a tremendous stroke of luck that we found each other.

Whitney: You joined the Harvard Business Review. What year did you join? Was it 2008?

Sarah: 2007.

Whitney: 2007. Okay. So how did you get that job?

Sarah: So, that came about, actually through some of the freelancing I was doing. I had picked up a side gig of writing these short pamphlets for an educational publisher. Um, the War of 1812, the Wild West, um, one, no offense to North Carolina, but kind of boring one on like, state, like, local politics in North Carolina. Which, now actually, are very interesting. But at that time were not, were not interesting to me at the time.

So, um, you know, it's kind of whatever they farmed out to me, I would research and write these short little educational pamphlets. Um, and it turned out that the woman who was sending me that work, who was a friend of a friend of my mother's. So, total old girls' network there, at work. Um, so, she was the sister of a woman who worked at Harvard Business Publishing.

So I sort of found out through this long, and somewhat convoluted chain of women in publishing in Boston, that there was an opening.

I went in, I had my interviews. At HBR, you know, we're sort of famous for these interviews that are like, you'll meet with six different people, back to back to back. And it will take the whole day. Um, and so I went in, and I did that. And this was for an entry-level position. You know, I interviewed with six or eight people for an entry-level position.

I was fortunate enough to be hired by them. And it was another one of those cases where as soon as I went in and had the interview, I thought, "I really want this job." So even though at the time, I think I applied, I wasn't 100% sure. When I left, after that day of interviews, I thought, "I really, really want this job."

Whitney: Did you do anything to help you get it? Like, did you write them a thank you note? Or anything like that? Do you remember?

Sarah: Yes. I wrote the thank you notes. Got to write the thank you notes. Um, I also tried to prepare really carefully for the interviews. Um, and I put a lot of thought into my cover letter. And I, I think sometimes people now aren't always sure if they should write one. And sometimes HR doesn't even send along your cover letter to the hiring manager.

But, I always write one. And, um, I remember, there were editors at HBR who were, participated in that hiring process, who said, "We loved your cover letter." So, I think putting the effort in, even if you're not sure if anyone's going to see it, in my case really paid off.

Whitney: Interesting. So the cover letter really made a difference.

Sarah: Yeah, and I, and I remember, I think the part of it that appealed, at least to one person, was that, you know, I had been writing these columns. And I also had been, as part of my many, sort of side gigs at the time, working in a bookstore. And I, this was, this job was specifically to focus on book publishing. And I said, you know, I've been a writer. I've sold books in bookstores. But I really want to come to HBR to learn, like, what happens in the middle? How do you go from writing to like, making a book that is sold in a bookstore?

And that just kind of captured the imagination of, of the people who read the, the cover letter. So I, I was very lucky in that.

Whitney: So you get the job. And you're thrilled. Do you remember the moment when you were like, "Wow, this business stuff is kind of interesting."

Sarah: Yeah. So, I mean, it's interesting. Cause the first six months on the job, I remember, were such a learning curve. And they were really exciting and energizing. And then, about six months in, I kind of hit a plateau. And I just thought, I kind of have figured out who all these people are. I figured out a bunch of stuff about the way this place works. And then the next six months were really, a little bit boring. It was a little bit, you know, I was like, oh, I'm not sure actually this is the right place for me anymore. Um. Because I had sort of gone through the frenzy of the initial, kind of learning the ropes. And then I just, it ... I wasn't sort of learning as, as fast as I wanted.

So, I had been looking for other jobs. And I actually found on Craigslist, another job at the same company, in just a different department. Um, and that was a job as an editor for the digital team, which was just starting up at the time. Um, HBR dot org. Um, and so I, I don't exactly remember how I went about applying for it, if I told my manager on the books department that I was going to do that. Or if I just did it.

But I, I ended up applying for this other job. Um, and getting it. And it was great, because I could apply everything that I had learned about, um, business and management and the publishing company in general, to this new job that was much faster paced on this small, you know, growing team, that was doing a ton of experimenting. And that was a job where my job changed, probably every six months for the first three years, because we were just growing so fast and trying so many new things.

So, once I joined the digital team, that's when I really felt like, oh, this is the place, this is the place for me.

Whitney: All right. So you do digital. So let's talk through, digital for three years. Then just kind of give us an overview of, after you do digital for three years, then what happens? So, some of the, you know, the ups and downs as you moved along over the next seven years.

Sarah: Yeah, so I would say, after, um, after probably my first three years on the digital team, we were just in a really different place as a company. We had had a reorg where the digital and print teams merged back into one team. You know, the country was just coming out of the great recession. So it was just a very different company than it had been when I first joined. Um, it felt very different, but it felt good.

Um, so then I kind of moved from one eh, like, we moved from a phase of sort of crazy digital experimentation to more of a kind of steady, just, year over year, trying to improve and expand on what we were doing. Um, I sort of just grew with the company. Um, I would kind of, you know, every two or three years, I would get a promotion and, and move a little higher up the masthead,

And so, you know, I mean, it, it was really, I was there in total for almost 12 years. And it was really lovely.

Whitney: So, six months ago, talk to us about what your title was. Um, at, at Harvard Business Review. What did a typical day look like for you, and then that'll start to move us to this decision that you made to, to move. So.

Sarah: Yeah.

Whitney: What did that look like?

Sarah: Yeah, so, um, my final title at Harvard Business Review was Executive Editor, which is pretty, you know, lofty sounding. Um, you are kind of at the top of, of the masthead. Um, which is a thing in the magazine that kind of tells you who works at the company. Um, and I was managing some people, I was giving a lot of other editors feedback on their articles. Um, I was still editing a bunch of stuff myself. But I was also sort of hel, helping other editors with their pieces, and, and kind of giving feedback and direction on those pieces.

A typical day would probably be, like, wall to wall meetings with only a couple of hours to kind of, edit, or grab lunch, or you know, do something. Answer emails. Um, but it was a lot of kind of managerial meetings and kind of, project meetings. Um, and then any time you sort of sit down at your desk, someone comes over and has a question about something.

So, it was, you know, you'd sort of show up at the office, and it would just begin. You know, it's like, sound the trumpets, we're off to the races. Um, and then at the end of the day, you know, sort of, the, the bell rings. And you're like, ah, well, that's done. You know, you get in the car and you go home. And I had a really long commute, so I would sort of start the day, leaving my house at 7. Get to work around, you know, 8:30. Um, leave work around 5:30 and get back home almost at 7 o'clock at night.

So they were, they were long, sort of jam-packed days. Like, full of ideas and people and meetings and authors and emails and, and all kinds of stuff.

Whitney: All right. So, 12 years in, you're an executive editor, and, um, you get a call from ... Tell us, tell us how this tran, this transpired, of the outreach of potentially going to do something new. And talk about that, what, what that looked like.

Sarah: Yeah. So, it's interesting. I, it's actually something I had been wondering about for a couple of years. Um, I, I think probably after I hit the 10-year mark at HBR. I thought, "Wow, that 10 years went by really fast." Um, I started HBR when I was 25. Um, at the time I started thinking about first making a move, I was 35. Um, and it, I was just thinking, like, "Am I gonna stay here forever?" You know, I'd had some friends actually ask me that question. "Are you just gonna, you know, stay there your whole career?" And it, I was sort of like, "Well, maybe." I mean, I really liked it at HBR. So I was kinda like, maybe I would just stay there my whole career.

But then I also felt kind of like, well, to have come in so young, and to not try something else, you know, why wouldn't I try something else? And I think, you know, I had some fears about, well, what if, what if I'm not as good at the new thing? What if I don't like it as much? Uh, what if I try it and it doesn't work out? Um, and when I was kind of honest with myself about, about that, I was like, well, I don't want the reason I don't try something new to be because I'm afraid.

So, once I kind of had that ah-ha moment, I think it was kind of only a matter of time until the right opportunity came along. Um, and ... So if I had started thinking about that probably a year or 18 months before I ended up making the move.

In that intermediate time, my, uh, boss of many years, Katherine Bell, had left HBR and become Editor-in-Chief of Barron's. I had kept in touch with her, and you know, we, we'd had a great relationship. So, I, I sort of said, "You know, I'm thinking about making a move, and can we explore these options?" Um, what advice, you know, would she give me about, sort of, next career steps?

And she said, "Well, if you're ready to leave HBR, if you ... If this is where you're at, then we can have a different conversation. Like, you know, instead of just sort of giving you advice, I could like, you know, I have a job that you might be interested in." Um, and I was like, "Oh, I didn't even think about that." Um, and, but then, we, we kind of, you know, had that conversation. Um, and it sounded like a, a job that I would enjoy doing. And, and hopefully be able to do well.

Whitney: So you'd been there for 12 years. You loved working at art, Harvard Business Review. What was hard about leaving?

Sarah: Oh my God, so many things. Um, I had people there I loved working with. I had had a very public-facing role at HBR. I was the host of the HBR Idea Cast, podcast, for about 10, about 10 years. Um, and so people identified me strongly with the brand. I identified with the brand. I got invited to go to lots of sort of conferences and events, and be onstage as like, a representative of this prestigious publication.

So, it was really giving up both the colleagues I adored and the work that I was good at, and also giving up this sort of very strong association with, with a strong and respected brand. And so, it was, um, it was a lot to walk away from. And it was a really hard decision to, uh, to make.

Whitney: Hmm. Was there anything easy about making that decision?

Sarah: No. No. It was the hardest decision I've made. And you know, it's funny, cause for my, my last episode of the, um, HBR IdeaCast, I interviewed Herminia Ibarra, who really studies work and identity. And I, um, in preparing for that interview, I can remember reading an article of hers where she had interviewed a, a guy who changed jobs who just said something like, "You know, I identified so strongly with that job that it was like trying to take off my own skin when I left."

And that really hit hard. Hit me hard, because I thought, yeah, it is like you're trying to, you know, take off your own skin. Or go from a caterpillar to a butterfly. Or vice versa. You know, you're like, really, it's a real change. And so, it was, it was really difficult.

Whitney: So, here you are. You've made the decision to jump off the curve to the bottom of a brand new learning curve at Barron's. Um, what are you doing now? And how long have you been there?

Sarah: Yes. So I have been there now, almost two weeks. (laughter) Um, which after 12, almost 12 years in one place, to be somewhere almost two weeks feels very weird. Um, and basically my first week, I had a bunch of meetings with people at Barron's, new colleagues, trying to figure out, you know, who they are and what they do, and how I can be helpful to them. And going up to IT repeatedly with my laptop, being like, "Hey, I need one more program," or "I can't quite figure out this one thing." Um, so by the end of my first week, the people at the IT desk would just be like, "Hey, Sarah." You know, I'm like, oh gosh, they know my face and my name now. It's like, gotten that bad.

So you sort of spent the first, I sort of spent the first week just trying to like, sign up for health insurance and sort of, learn people's names and do those basic things. Um, and then second week, I, I have really been trying to actually do my job. My primary job, is to acquire and edit articles for Barron's. So, I've been really trying to reach out to people and start building that pipeline.

But it's hard, because you know, it doesn't feel very efficient yet. And I am used to doing things really efficiently.

Whitney: Is there anything about what you're doing now that does feel comfortable?

Sarah: Definitely when I am either writing something or editing something, or, you know, reviewing research, to maybe commission a piece on. Like, that is very similar to what I was doing at HBR, and I, I was sort of able to build up that expertise at HBR, and then take it with me when I left. So, um, that seems like, so far that has been comfortable. And it's been great to be editing again, because you know, at the end of my time at HBR, I was more of kind of a manager and someone who oversaw stuff. And so, it's been really, actually nice to get back to this thing that I've, I really love doing.

Whitney: Hmm. So you're spending a lot more of your time editing now?

Sarah: Yes. Yes.

Whitney: And it sounds like you're finding different authors. So you're not, cause you're not as focused on management. You're much more focused on, on investing and, and et cetera. Is that right?

Sarah: Yes. And so I also have been like, reading a lot of books and articles, and trying to sort of get my head around, um, more of what an investor audience might be interested in, as opposed to a managerial audience.

Whitney: Okay, just a few more questions before we put this on pause and we revisit the conversation in a few months. Is there anything about yourself, and maybe this is too early to ask the question, but I'm gonna ask it anyway ... where you're saying, "Huh. This is surprising to me about myself, or about the workplace." Like, you're seeing, you're, you're not blind through familiarity, you're seeing things anew and afresh. Anything that's sort of like, huh, that's interesting. I didn't notice that before.

Sarah: That is a really great question. Um, I mean, something surprised me that, um, even though I knew that leaving HBR would mean giving up a podcast I had hosted for 10 years. Um, you know, not being on email and Slack all day with the group of people that I had, you know, really come to be like a family to me. It was surprisingly disorienting to be cut off from all of that. So, I had a couple weeks in between jobs, and, um, you know, that first time you go to like, kind of check your company email. And it doesn't work, and you can't sign in, cause they've turned off your account. It's super weird. Um, and strange. It's, it's almost, it almost felt like, um, being blindfolded or something. Like, I know that there's stuff happening. I just can't see it. So, I, I was surprised at how disorienting I, I found that. Um, yeah.

Whitney: So when we chat in three or four months, are there one or two things, metrics, that you're going to use to say, "Okay, we got off to a good start." And, or, what do you want to have accomplished in those few months?

Sarah: Yeah. So, I think that I definitely have some sort of quantity goals I need to hit, in terms of the number of articles I'm editing or writing. So whether or not I've been able to hit those goals will be, uh, important. So there's sort of just the number of, of pieces I'm responsible for.

And then the other thing I've been looking at is, you know, how are those pieces resonating with readers. You know, so far in the first couple weeks, I've edited a couple pieces. I've written a couple pieces. They are not on the most-read list of Barrons.com. And that's a new feeling for me, too, cause it used to be, I'd edit something, publish on HBR, and it would sort of zoom to the top of that most-read list. And I'd think, you know, "Yeah, I, I still got it."

Whitney: (laugh)

Sarah: Um (laughter) So, now I'm, I'm in this position of being like, "Huh, okay. I haven't quite figured out what these readers want yet." So I'm hoping that in a few months from now, I will both be producing lots of content and also that it will be sort of, widely read and impactful.

Whitney: Huh. Love it. Okay. Sarah, anything else you want to tell me or tell our listeners or audience for today?

Sarah: You know. It's a big change. And it's really disorienting, and, and weird. But, uh, I guess we'll see what happens. Um, I will tell you one thing, other thing that has been surprising to me, is I'm used to being a total blabbermouth in meetings. And being the colleague who interrupts people, and makes jokes. And kind of like, you know, is a Chatty Kathy. And so far, at Barron's, I am not that person at all. Um, so, you know, hopefully in a few months from now, my coll, new colleagues will know that I have a sense of humor and that I am-

Whitney: (laugh)

Sarah: -a talkative person at some times. (laugh) And not just a door mouse who doesn't speak. (laugh)

Whitney: Cause you're getting the lay of the land. Cause you're at the bottom of the curve. Wow.

Sarah: Yeah. I'm just listening and trying to learn, and trying to figure out what it's all about at this phase. But, um, yeah.

Whitney: Yeah. Well, Sarah, this has been so great. We will all look forward to speaking to you again in a few months. And then we'll put these two interviews together, so that people can really have an experience of what it's like to be at the top of the curve and how that feels, and then having the experience in real-time of what it's like when you make a decision. A choice to disrupt yourself and start anew.

So, thank you again for being willing to do this. And we'll talk to you in a few months.

Sarah: Awesome. Sounds good. Thanks, Whitney.

I talked to Sarah about four months later. You'll hear that she's making her way toward the sweet spot of the curve in so many aspects of the job, but as she does, there are unexpected elements of this new position that emerge.

Whitney: Sarah, welcome back. We spoke in December when you had just joined Barron's, and I think it had been about two weeks, and it was all in, all a little daunting, a bit new, and we had agreed that we would meet again several months later and find out how things were going. Do you want to just share with us how you i- i- it seems like you were feeling four or five months ago?

Sarah: You know, when I had decided to leave HBR that was a decision that probably took a couple of years sort of moving from the back of my mind to the front of mind to become comfortable with the idea of doing something different. Um, so you're at the top of that learning curve for a quite a while, and then that's sort of an uncomfortable place to be as, as you have written, Whitney, you can become sort of complacent or, you know, it- it's sort of challenging in, in, in its own way to, to

be in a, a place where you are thinking about that kind of change, or ready for some kind of change. But then when you make the change, and then you're at the bottom of your new learning (laughs) curve that is also uncomfortable.

So (laughing) you sort of go from, you know, the, the top of one curve to the bottom of the other, and, um, it, it means that you're, uh, sort of period of discomfort just extends (laughs) lo- longer as you sort of try to find that sweet spot, this, the steep part of a learning curve. So I think, um, the last six months for me have been one of, um, you know, a lot of growth and learning, but I still feel very much at the, at the bottom of a new learning curve, um, so it's been interesting, and a, a, kind of a long and winding journey.

Whitney: Say more about that. You've gone from a managerial audience to an investor audience, has that been part of what's made it, um, you, you said quote, "It felt a little ... You felt it a little disoriented and weird.", um, so is that part of it, or is there something else that feels, makes that, that, that discomfort so acute at the low end of the curve?

Sarah: Yeah, I mean so the audience is totally different, um, the, you know, manager audience versus investor audience. Um, there is also a kind of different, um, that the sources of traffic are very different, so one of the things I've learned is, you know, HBR is very, gets a, a bunch of traffic from social media, um, Barron's gets most of its traffic from search, um-

Whitney: Hmm.

Sarah: ... and, so that changes the way that you think about edits, and, uh, headlines and, um, topics. And, so I think, you know, just sort of learning more about search is, is like a really basic sort of tactical thing, but, uh, at the same it time sort of trickles up and changes a bunch of the other ways that you work. HBR was a very female dominated environment, there was lots of women who worked there, um, Barron's is very, very male, um, so that's a, just a big shift. You know, at, at HBR I was working in an office every day with the same people I'd worked with by and large, um, for 12 years, uh, Barron's I not only have new colleagues, but I am working remotely most of the time. So instead of being in our New York office I'm mostly am working, um, from my house in the suburbs of Boston. So, um, lots of changes, um, from company culture, to the work environment, to the work itself.

Whitney: HBR largely female, Barron's largely male, um, what has been a, a learning curve around that in terms of being able to navigate a world where you've got, uh, you know, different, different majorities?

Sarah: Yeah, I mean it just changes the way communication happens. I mean this is going to sound sort of maybe like I'm stereotyping people, but I've just noticed like at Barron's meetings tend to be fairly subdued, um, compared to what I'm used to, and at first I was like why is everyone so quiet? (laughs) Um, and it's, it's just, you know, people sort of come in, they sit down at the meeting, um, it tends to be a bit more transactional, kind of here's what we need to do today, um, or people send you an email, and it's, you know, sort of just like Sarah comma, like where's that article question mark, (laughs) you know?

Whitney: (laughs)

Sarah: And it, and it's, it's not like ... You know, at HBR you're sort of maybe used to a little bit more chit-chat, or they, the email has some, you know, softening language in it, oh, hey, sorry to bother you about this, you know, just wondering, all this stuff that we actually often tell women not to do. Um, but I had gotten very used to people just communicating in that kind of indirect, uh, emoji-filled way, and it's just different to be in an environment where people are just kind of a little bit more all business I would say.

Whitney: Yeah, interesting, interesting. It's especially, um, fascinating the comment you just made where women are taught not to communicate that way, and yet women still do communicate that way, and, so then there's this adjustment moving from, from a world where the communication styles very different, eh, are, are very, um, very different. So okay, what about the remote versus being in an office, what has that been like, and, and, uh, what kinds of adjustments are you making? I suspect there's some upside and some downside.

Sarah: Yes, you are 100% right about that, Whitney. Um, I ... This has been the toughest part of the transition for me I think. Um, on the one hand the parts that are great are that I, you know, finally ha- 'cause I'm not commuting all the time I finally have time to workout, I have time to cook dinner. Um, so I've lost almost like 10 pounds, um, I'm sleeping really well, uh, I feel a lot healthier physically. Um, the downside is that I'm alone a lot of the time, um, and that has been difficult to get used to, um, ha- after having been used to being in a, a sort of bustling office environment, so, um, yeah, it's been difficult. I've had to kind of be very strict and disciplined about sticking to a schedule, um, and, and I've just had to really try to work hard on the times I've gone down to headquarters to try to meet people and get to know them, but, you know, it's not easy. People are very busy, it's a weekly news magazine, um, you know, everyone is sort of works very hard and very focused all day, so they don't really ... You know, you do- It's not like you have time to go out for coffee just 'cause the person from out of town is there being like-

Whitney: (laughs)

Sarah: ... oh, hey, do you want to go get coffee? It's like no, I have a deadline. Um-

Whitney: Let's go hang out, yeah-

Sarah: I know.

Whitney: ... interesting.

Sarah: So yeah, so I, I think that's been definitely the bi- the biggest adjustment, and the one that ... It's had a lot of upsides, but it's also just been s- It surprised me actually how, um, how challenging I have found it.

Whitney: So what are you doing? So now that you figured that out that that is a challenge what are some things that you're doing, or maybe you're thinking about doing 'cause you're still again, at the low end of the learning curve to, to find that, that good mix of being able to still enjoy the, um, being able to work remotely, but still feel connected, and, and, and, and, and collaborative with your colleagues, or it ... You probably feel collaborative, but, but feel connected to them, or just connected to people period maybe?

Sarah: Yeah, it's more connected to people period probably. Um, so I di- I- I've tried to, um, be more proactive about scheduling things with friends, or scheduling coffee with former colleagues, or, um, you know, just sort of reaching out to people in a more proactive way just 'cause I know I, if I don't do that I, I literally won't see another human face (laughs) until my husband comes home from his job, so I've tried to, to just be more active about that. And I've tried to also just be more, um, sort of present on things like Slack and email with my colleagues in New York just to make sure that I'm, you know, being responsive, and getting back to them. And, um, yeah, so I, I, I don't know, I- I- I'm definitely still sort of feeling my way. I, I think I've ... It's ... I think it's also been a challenge to just make sure that you can focus in a room by yourself five days a week, um-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sarah: ... sometimes (laughs) six days a week. Um, (laughing) right, you know, it- it's like-

Whitney: Yes, uh-huh

Sarah: Yeah, it's hard to, um, it's hard to sort of turn that off and on. So I've been experimenting with going to like the public library, or a co-working space, or sometimes, you know, just to get out of the house and do something different, but I'm definitely still sort of just bumbling my way through this.

Whitney: Hmm. It'll be interesting. So it's been yo- like you said about six months, it'll be interesting to see where, what that looks like in another six months 'cause I, I bet you will, you know, continue to figure that out, and find, find that happy, happy medium. Um, we discussed measurements that you would use to determine if you had gotten off to a good start, you mentioned quantity of goals, you know, quantity of goals like the number of articles you edited or written, and, you know, ha- the goals of having your pieces zoomed to the top of the most read lists. Um, talk to us about w- those goals, were those, have those turned out to be the metrics that you felt are in fact the most important, or have those goals shifted as you've thought about how to measure if you're succeeding in your first six months?

Sarah: Yeah. So I, I've definitely met the quantity goals, um, and I've sort of tried to take what I have learned from producing a large number of articles, and use it to help me, um, sort of guide me as I try to figure out what it is that Barron's readers want. We've had a few staff changes since I've been at Barron's, so that has also changed the goals that I'm sort of working towards. You know, I have a new boss now, um, I don't have the, the boss I had when I started, so, you know, her goals are slightly different than my previous bosses goals, um, so I've had to adjust there. And I've also learned a lot about, um, kind of what doesn't work, um, from all the articles I've edited and published, and a few things about what does work.

So I've, I sort of haven't reached the traffic goals that I had envisioned for myself, but I feel like I've made progress in kind of figuring out maybe how to get there.

Whitney: Interesting. So what you're saying is that you've been doing, as you would expect at the low end of the learning curve, a lot of experimentation, so let's try this article, let's try this article, and si- try this approach, let's try this title, et cetera, and figuring out. And you feel like you've made a lot of progress in learning wh- uh, what you think people want so that you can continue to progress toward those goals,

Sarah: Yes, that's a much more elegant way of saying it-

Whitney: (laughs)

Sarah: ... yeah. And what I've been trying to do is I have this giant spreadsheet where I've been keeping track of everything I've published, and the page views that it's gotten, and kind of the category of, you know, what format was it, what kind of author was it, what's the topic, um, you know, is it based on a book, is it based on timely news, um, is it based on new research, and I've been trying to keep track of all this information so I can see how things are doing. So it's sort of ... It's not just sort of experimenting and throwing stuff at the wall, it's really a series of structured experiments where you're saying well, I haven't really tried something quite like this.

And then sort of learning over time oh, like, you know, articles that are, you know, written by people of books coming out do slightly better than articles that are, you know, maybe tied to events in the news, so then you kind of adjust what you're trying to do based on sort of these early

signs. So I think it's really important not just to experiment, but to track those experiments in, in a structured way.

Whitney: So you're being really analytical, I love it, that's fascinating. Now, were you this analytical at HBR, or is this something, uh, eh ... So I, I suspect you were analytical, but it sounds like you have really stepped up that they, the analysis that you're doing around what articles are working, um, versus not.

Sarah: Yes. I think I was always an analytical at HBR, but at HBR I was one of team of, you know, a couple dozen editors who were all doing this work, and at Barron's I'm the only one, so it's really put a lot more, um, pressure on me to figure out what's working, um, and to try to figure it out quickly. So at, at HBR, you know, we could kind of toss ideas around, or learn from each other, or, you know, you could say we want to try this topic five different ways and see which one does the best, um, and at Barron's I'm a, I'm sort of a team of one who, who works on these kinds of articles. So, um, I feel like I have to be much more disciplined in my experimentation because I don't have a team of two dozen people to kind of say oh, go off and try this a bunch a ways and get back to me and let me know, uh, what works. So I think being, being a lone wolf has really made me, um, try to focus more clearly on what's working and what's not.

Whitney: That's fantastic, I, I love it. I can just, in my mind's eye I can see this whole spreadsheet, this Excel-

Sarah: (laughs)

Whitney: ... spreadsheet with all this data, and I think it's really interesting. It'll be fun 'cause, you know, if you think about it like in a year's time you can go back and analyze (laughs) and write an article about the analysis that you've done potentially.

So you mentioned something else that caught my attention, which is since you started you got a new boss, and, so I think that's a really interesting, um, development because we hire bosses, um, more than we hire a job when we take a job. So that's actually, um, going to potentially make that learning curve a little bit, the, the low end a little bit longer 'cause you've now got to figure out ... 'Cause you, your prior boss you had worked for before, is that correct?

Sarah: Yes, yes.

Whitney: Okay. So now you have a new boss that you haven't worked for before, so what are some things, um, that you are doing to figure out what's it like for a new boss?

Sarah: It was not sort of what, something I anticipated. You know, when you start a new job you don't-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sarah: ... think oh, within six months I'll have a different boss, but, um-

Whitney: Right.

Sarah: ... um, so at first it was kind of, uh, like sup- surprising at, and not necessarily in a good way. Oh, when I found out (laughs) that that would be happening I was sort of, was like wait, what? Um-

Whitney: (laughs)

Sarah: ... but actually my new boss has been, um, really wonderful and warm, and has given me lots of, um, great feedback, which has been really helpful. Um, I think we spend a bit more time on the phone just because, um, she's in New York and I'm in Boston, um, and we've worked together now as colleagues, but I, you know, obviously I don't have years of history with her as I did with my previous boss. So, um, I think-

Whitney: Interesting.

Sarah: ... um ... Yeah. And, and one of the, the nice upsides is that she's a real subject matter expert, um, and she's done work like I've done before, so I've been able to get a lot of, um, very, uh, tactical and granular feedback from her, which has been really helpful. So, um, it definitely was a, a kind of surprise when it happened, but I actually think it's, it's been a good kind of, um, opportunity to, to learn more about the subject matter from someone who knows a lot about it.

Whitney: So it was kind of like okay, low end of the cur- low end of the learning curve, we're moving up. Oh, no, by the way low end of the learning curve again, new boss, but wha- It sounds like what you're saying is it's giving you some, because she has a completely different domain expertise, it's allowing you to make your learning curve, um, a bit steeper in fact, or move up your learning more quickly because her, because of her expertise?

Sarah: Yeah, and I think, um, I think it's, you know, one of those things where in a fast moving organization the goals are always sort of shifting, um, and the, um, timelines are always sort of shifting, the people are always changing, um, you know? I think my previous organization is a very stable place, it's financially very stable, um, the people tend to stay there a long time. Um, and what I'm just learning is that in New, the New York media world things change very fast, um, and people move around a lot, and that's one of the things I wanted to kind of see for myself. And one of the-

Whitney: Hmm.

Sarah: ... reasons I wanted to do this was just to see okay, like what is that whole New York media business really like, and I, I'm getting a window into that.

Whitney: Hmm, interesting. All right, so a few more questions for you. We talked a little bit about the sadness and even the grief that you and others were feeling when you left HBR. Um, what does that feel like now, wha- and what, yeah, what does it look like and feel like now?

Sarah: Um, that's a tough one 'cause I think I still, I still miss HBR a lot. Um, and I think one of the things I've just tried to make peace with is that I might always in some ways miss HBR, and I might always miss that time in my life and those people, um, and that's okay. It doesn't mean that I, uh, was wrong to leave, it doesn't mean that, you know, that I've made a mistake, it just means that I had really strong relationships with those people, and that I really loved that place, and, um, that, that missing it or missing those people, you know, is just a sign of how much I cared about it.

And those people are still around. I can pop in to brighten and have lunch with people, or, um, catch up with people over the phone or on the weekends, and they're all still there, you know- (laughs)

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sarah: ... they're not that far away. So-

Whitney: Right.

Sarah: ... I've tri- I've tried to be good about just keeping up with people, um, and, you know, giving myself some space to, to grow and try a, a new thing, but also just keeping up with people, yeah.

Whitney: Hmm. You know, when you just said that I could feel myself tear up a little bit because I could feel the emotion that you felt, and I, I loved what you said is that the sadness is a signal to you that you care deeply, and that you feel very connected to people. And it's not, it's not a bad thing that you feel sad, in fact it's a, a really good thing that you, you felt, eh, and felt and still feel a little bit sa- of sadness because it means that it really matters to you, uh-huh (affirmative), lovely.

Sarah: (laughs) Thanks.

Whitney: U- Um, okay, so couple final questions, or a couple, three. So, um, what are some surprising things that you have learned about yourself through this new experience of jumping from one curve to the next?

Sarah: So I have remembered that, how much I dislike change. (laughing) Um, I've always disliked it, I think a lot of people do, but, um, it had, it had been a really long time since I made a major life change. And, so, um, it's kind of one of those things where I'm like oh, right, this is hard, right-

Whitney: (laughs)

Sarah: ... um, and it's been good to have that experience and to go through it 'cause even though it is hard you do learn a lot about yourself. I also have remembered how much I really get tripped up in life sometimes on like the small details of, of life, like adult life, which sounds so lame, but is so true, so like signing up for new health insurance and all of that stuff, and-

Whitney: Oh, oh.

Sarah: ... new retirement plans and everything, I was like oh, right, I hate this. (laughing) Um, but I think, uh, no one gets excited about doing the paperwork of life, but, um, it was an interesting kind of reminder that I'm not always great at those kinds of details, and I tend to procrastinate them, and I have to come up with all kinds of little tricks to make myself like renew my car registration, and even when I'm not changing jobs. And when I'm changing jobs and there's so many new little things like that, um, you know, that can ... It's just one of those things where you're like oh, right, I forgot how much I, I hate being bogged down by this sort of adulting. Um-

Whitney: Right.

Sarah: ... and then I think, eh, um, I think on the, the sort of more positive side, um, I think ... I mean I've learned that I am I think better than I give myself credit for at, um, making connections with new people. Um, one of the things I was nervous about before I left was like how am I going to (laughs) remember everyone's name, and (laughs) like, you know, how am I going to make friends at my new office, and, um, uh, actually it's been delightful to get to know people, people at Barron's are really quite nice and kind. Um, and, um, we ... My husband and had a kind of family health situation that we had to navigate this winter, which on top of everything else was like kind of it's a lot to be dealing with, but my new colleagues were like unbelievably supportive, um, and kind, and caring and understanding. And, so, um, uh, that was sort of just a, a pleasant reminder that there are kind people everywhere, um, so that's been something that I, that I really enjoyed.

Um, and I guess the other thing is I realized being a new person at an organization myself there is so many things that you don't know, that you don't know how to use the content management system, you don't know simple workflow things, you don't know cultural things about the way we do things around here. And I think that having been new in that way, um, has really helped me

realize that especially towards the end of my time at HBR I don't think I was great at onboarding new people because I had just been there for so long that I didn't even think of these kinds of details. Um, and, so I think it's been good for me to go through this experience, and (laughs) remember that when you're just joining an organization you really have to have someone explain, uh, lots of things to you.

And there's a bunch of it that you can just pick up over time, but it really helps to have colleagues who will say oh, like here is, you know, the way this small piece works, um, or here is the way this other thing usually happens, because if you don't have that you can kind of flail around a little bit.

Whitney: Hmm. So one thing that I think is interesting, and, uh, since I have known you for 10 years is I, uh, you know, how you talked about how people were so kind. And I, I think one thing that I'm just reflecting back to you, and, um, and how you said that you realized, but you kind of moved on from it really quickly is that you're very good at making friends and connecting with people. And I think it's lovely that you have had an opportunity to have that experience of like oh, yes, people are kind, and yes, I am good at connecting with other people, and, so that makes me happy to hear that that's something that you've realized oh, yeah, I actually am really good at this.

For people who are jumping, who are getting ready to do something new, for perhaps people who know that they need to something new and are terrified to do it, what's suggestions would you have for them once they make that jump to make that transition a bit smoother for them and a little bit less fear filled?

Sarah: Yeah. I think ... I mean I got some advice when I was thinking about all of this, um, that was really good and that I've come back to a couple times. So, and that piece of advice was just that no matter what you decide there will be times you wonder if you made the wrong choice. Um, so if you decide to play it safe and not change you will wonder if that was the right choice, if you decide to make the change and take the risk there will be times you wonder if that was the right choice, um, so you can't really avoid that kind of questioning or doubt, um, by staying in one place.

And sometimes to get the answer to the sort of deeper questions, the personal questions, the kind of "what am I doing with my life," "is this really what I'm meant to do," um, to answer those kinds of questions sometimes you have to try different things. Um, and just because a particular choice doesn't work out doesn't mean it was the wrong choice. You know, like even if you end up taking a leap and falling flat (laughs) on your face, which hopefully won't happen, but even if it does, um, you'll really have learned something, um, and you just make the decisions. You make decisions with the best information you have at the time, um, and then you just move forward from there.

And I think there are very few things in life that can't be then changed, or altered, or reconsidered, or, you know, it ... So even if you're sort of worried that you're not making the right choice I, I, I guess I would say staying in one place, staying still, keeping everything the same, is not an option because things around you also change, um, and you have to sort of learn how to change with them.

Whitney: Well said. Sarah Green, thank you so much for being with us.

Sarah: Thank you, Whitney, thank you for having me.

It's so fascinating to hear Sarah's advice to those who need to start something new and are terrified to do it. In fact it's almost as though she was giving that advice to herself. As of June 2019, when I'm recording this outro, Sarah has taken another leap. She's no longer at Barron's and will be starting a new position at Bloomberg shortly.

There's a lesson in this, sometimes it happens that a new S curve isn't quite right. We know from the theory of disruption that your odds of success are 6x higher when you pursue a disruptive course. But that's 6% to 36%. Which means it might not be the right curve. So you jump again. This mid-curve leaping happens, not infrequently, when your initial jump is from a company that you worked for for a long time like Sarah did for Harvard Business Review – kind of like a rebound boyfriend.

The great news is that no S Curve of ever wasted. All of the amazing skills that Sarah picked up at Barrons' - managing new communication styles, structuring articles for a different audience, moving from working as part of an editorial team to working on her own - will be beneficial as she moves to this new curve.

Practical tip:

We're halfway through 2019 at this point - it might be worth doing a quick review--- Where are you are on your current S Curve of learning? Are things challenging, but not overwhelmingly so? Do you feel like you're really cruising in your current role? Do you need to ask, like Sarah, is this potentially not the right curve?

Though it's never completely possible to anticipate everything that will happen when we make a big change, change is still something you can prepare for so that you are confident when it comes. If you want to be even more prepared for change than you already are, sign up for our free email course by visiting <https://whitneyjohnson.com/change/>

Thank you again to Sarah Green Carmichael 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.