

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 123: KAREN BEATTIE

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

My guest today is Karen Beattie, founder and managing director at [The Growth Faculty](#), a leading provider of education and resources for entrepreneurs and business leaders.

Whitney: Karen Beattie, welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast.

Karen: Thank you Whitney. Thank you very much for having me.

Whitney: We're delighted to have you and it's, um, fun to be able to learn a little bit more about you and let's, so let's start with a question that I think always tells us a lot about people, is where did you grow up, um, and what did you want to be when you grew up?

Karen: Okay, um, well my, I was an expat child. Um, I was born in um, a small village called San Fernando in Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean and uh, my parents, uh, we left when I was two and uh, at first my father worked for a company called Schlumberger and our first posting was Libya. Um, and we then moved to Nigeria. We spent seven years in the United Arab Emirates, a little time in Jakarta, Philippines for, um, and that was all through my primary school years and landed in Perth, uh, western Australia, first year high school.

Whitney: Wow. You lived in a lot of different places.

Karen: Absolutely. It was quite extraordinary. Uh, looking back, you know, it was, it was just the most amazing experience and obviously has shaped who I am today.

Whitney: So you say that it shaped who you are. H-h- how would you say, when you, you know, you, when you do certain things, do you, how would you say it shaped you? I am just curious.

Karen: I think primarily around change. I'm incredibly adaptable and I don't mind, um, not being comfortable with what's coming ahead. So, you know, I really enjoyed, you know, my father would come home sometimes and everything was spontaneous and um, I, he would come home sometimes and say, hey, listen, we're moving, we're moving country, going to take you to a new school and I used to really embrace that. I love that idea of going into new school, meeting new friends, and um learning about a new culture and I thought that's the way everybody lived. That was my world and I just thought that's what everyone did.

Whitney: So it's interesting when I hear you say that Karen, um, is I, you said you really like change and your dad would say w- we're going to move and you'd say, okay, let's go. So tell me, I, I'm curious, and this is like a very ... almost a vignette moment, but I think about we moved to where we live now four years ago. My daughter, first day of high school, brand new, doesn't know anybody. Karen, you, by the time you're 14 you've lived in, you've gone to five or six different schools. When you would arrive somewhere first day, and I suspect this carries over to today, what do you do in order to acclimate and feel like, okay, I, I feel a sense of, of safety and security and belonging here. What are some things that you do right from the get go?

Karen: Well, you know, I can't really, to be honest, recall what I did. I just, I just remember enjoying being the new person in a classroom, and the inquisitive nature of everyone around I think, and um, and also learning about people. You know, I was really into sports, so I just joined the sports team. I'd just get involved in everything there was an offer at each of the schools. I, I went to an American school system, um, and that was mostly through my primary school years and they just embraced success. And, uh, I just really thrived in that environment. I must say though, as I got older and I, when I moved to Australia in first year high school, I kind of expected that similar culture and it was very, it was very different.

I stood out and people didn't understand. Um, I was, American accent. No, never lived in the US, I'm from Trinidad, that's my home country. So it was quite an anomaly, um, for people, um, in my, my school in, in Perth because they'd never really, a lot of people hadn't actually traveled extensively. And I just remember actually, like the reversed happened when I went to Perth. I actually went quiet. I tried to go under the radar. Um, so it had a reverse effect on me as I got older because I was very aware of um, what people thought and their reaction-

Whitney: And you were also 14, right? Right in the middle of puberty, which is a really tough age and I think, well, I was going to say for girls, but I think it's tough for boys and girls.

Did you go to college? Maybe I shouldn't assume that you went to college.

Karen: I went to UWA, University of Western Australia. Yes, I did.

Whitney: Okay. And what did you study?

Karen: I started out doing a maths degree, in mathematical sciences and I was very strong in that area and I remember sitting in a room of 500 engineers and kind of wondering what am I going to do with a maths degree. I didn't have very much guidance and so, um, yeah, I ended up with a science degree, and really, what did I want to do when I grew up? I, I really was one of those people that didn't know. I knew what I liked and I knew what I enjoyed and I just knew that I wanted my job to, to allow me to travel and, and help people.

Whitney: You wanted to travel and help people?

Karen: Yep.

Whitney: That's what you knew?

Karen: Yep.

Whitney: And you were comfortable with change?

Karen: Comfortable with change.

Whitney: Okay. So what did you do after college? Did you go into events and events management immediately? Walk us through how you ended up starting The Growth Faculty.

Karen: Sure. After my university days, I worked for a year and um, then I traveled, I decided that I was going to do whatever most Australian people in their early twenties do is travel overseas. So I went, I went to the UK and I was only going for six months. I wanted to embrace, you know, travel through Europe and I landed a job with a company that was actually bringing Anthony Robbins to the UK for the very first time. And that was quite an extraordinary experience. So that was my first job, um, in events and-

Whitney: With Anthony Robbins or Tony Robbins.

Karen: Yes, yes-

Whitney: Yeah, just you know, just Tony Robbins, that's all.

Karen: That's all. Just Tony Robbins and, you know, the, the guy that owned the company, he was under 30, and he's like, okay, Karen, you know, here's a computer, you know, set up the registration system. We're just expecting 9,000 people over the three cities, you know, he just had this real entrepreneurial spirit and just left me to it. So I had to find my way through it and then I ended up moving to the marketing department and having to manage, you know, 50 marketing alliances over, you know, over Europe. We had six months to deliver this event and I don't think we slept for six months. And we just made it happen and it was one of the most extraordinary experiences obviously, you know. And at the time I didn't realize, you know, obviously the impact it would have on me.

Whitney: Okay. So walk me back. How did you get that job? Or did you just kind of fall into it?

Karen: Well, a good friend of mine, um, I was, you know, traveling just through connections in London and living in London and a friend of mine, um, ran a business and said, can you give me a hand? I've just won the right to bring Anthony to, to the UK for the first time. And so I said, yeah, why not? I'll give you a hand. That's how it started, seriously.

Whitney: Wow. Serendipity.

Karen: Yeah, so purely coincidence, yeah, absolutely-

Whitney: Serendipity. Well, what's interesting is total serendipity, but when I look at your three criteria, travel, help, your ability to manage change. I mean, that, that agility that you have just because it's part of your DNA. Because it sounds like it's something that your dad was really good at, your mom was really good at, and you're just like, yeah, I got this. I can handle it.

Karen: Absolutely. And, you know-

Whitney: Fascinating.

Karen: And, and living and breathing Anthony's content at the very start, you know, he, there he was, helping people, you know, to live their best lives, live with passion, you know, and um, you know, that was sort of ingrained in my DNA, you know.

Whitney: So, you do this amazing thing in the UK and then you come back to Australia. Talk to us about how you got this idea for the Growth Faculty and what did you do and what year was it.

Karen: I returned to Australia in the late, uh, in the mid 1990s and I decided that, and I, I moved to Sydney, um, kind of sight unseen. I had some friends there and I got a job at the Institute of Chartered Accountants and it was really a great place to start because it really helped me to understand what was going on in Australia. I hadn't been there in eight years and really learn the art of pulling programs together for an industry that I had no experience in. So I learned the art of working with you know, committees and pulling programs together in marketing. And so it was a really great skillset to have and that combined with, you know, my Anthony Robbins kind of set me up for the next move. And I guess I just never really saw myself, you know, in a large company.

So after two years, the institutes, you know, getting enough experience, um, I decided that I wanted to, um, organize, you know, events for people and, and, and for fee for management service. And because I wanted - the desire, the motivation for the league was basically because I wanted to again, design my own life, you know, I had a vision of flexibility and freedom that I'd be able to work from anywhere (laughs) And, uh, little did I know how hard you had to work for that flexibility and freedom. So it was a massive leap of faith. I backed myself. I remember my boss saying, hey, listen, it's Christmas. Do you think this is a really good time for you to resign and start a business? I'm like, you know, I'm, I'm ready to go. And so the groundwork there. So I was organizing conferences just, you know, for parks and leisure for all different industries and um, you know, and then I land at this contract with, um, MYOB. I, do you have MYOB in the US? You know, it's um-

Whitney: No, what is it?

Karen: It's accounting software. So Zero, you know, um, back in those days and at the time the government was bringing in the goods and services tax for the first time. So it was massive for businesses in Australia. So MYOB wanted to help their clients, their small business clients, you know, make the transition to all the reporting that was required for GST. And so they decided to run a bunch of seminars and they came to me on the recommendation of the Institute of Chartered Accountants and said, can you help us run around these GST seminars? So what happened was that, um, and which unbeknownst to them, you know, they had such an uptake, so we registered 40,000 business owners over eight months across 140 seminars because people were so terrified of this transition and wanted to know more.

And that was pre-online registrations that was pre, you know, and so we were on the receiving end of phone calls, these really disgruntled small business owners, feeling that they were hard done by, you know, it's hard work running a business. So we would get, we'd get the bane of every, every challenge they would have. And I just remember thinking, you know, what if I was able to provide, you know, these small business owners access to leadership and strategy and other content, um, to help them run a better business, to, to ease that kind of pain and, you know, help them manage people better.

And the question kept coming up, let me see, you know, if I can run events for these people outside of the GST content. So, um, that's where I took my next leap of faith. I, um, I actually brought out Michael Gerber, he was the very first speaker that I took an actual financial risk on myself and brought out to the small business market, um-

Whitney: Okay, just pause for two seconds. So Michael Gerber, *The E-Myth*, if you haven't read it, anybody who has any small business anywhere, in any form or fashion, you must read this book. Okay.

Karen: Absolutely.

Whitney: So you said, I'm going to bring this guy out and you basically backed him yourself?

Karen: I did. And I, (laughing) and I had no database, no relationships, no nothing, no sponsors and we ended up getting two and a half thousand people across three cities. It was a massive uptake. It's probably one of the most successful events I've run. And I just remember for those five months, I just had this reoccurring nightmare that I'd be sitting in the front row all by myself (laughing) going great, "Karen, that was a really great idea (laughing) Who said Michael Gerber would work?" And again, I went through another period of five months of not sleeping, just going and just working hard and um, yeah, paid off. That was kind of, you know, my business 2.0 and I moved from a management for fee service to, to starting to take the risk on my event and creating the events that I wanted to give access to the SME market because-

Whitney: Karen, pause for just a second. What do you mean when you say management for fee service? What does that mean?

Karen: There's a lot of companies that organize conferences for businesses and get paid a fee for that. So there's no risk involved. They go, we got to organize the annual conference and I'm going to pay you, event management company to run that conference for us.

Whitney: Got it. Okay. So this was the first time that you said, no, no one's paying me a fee. I'm going to organize the conference, I'm going to take on the risk and I'm going to get the profit, to the extent that there is a profit and that was the first time you did this?

Karen: Yes, and I'm going to get, I'm responsible for getting the bums on seats so to speak.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative). You know what's interesting to me as I'm listening to you tell the story is that you did the, you did the Institute of Chartered Accountants, then you had the GST, so the goods and services tax. That problem that people had really opened the door to your understanding. Like on the one hand, you've got all these people really, really frustrated, but it was this massive market research opportunity, right? I mean, that's what gave you the confidence that there was demand for, for Michael Gerber.

Karen: Absolutely, and in the marketplace, all the conferences that were out there were like \$1,000 a day, right? And small business operators can't afford that. So what I did with Michael is I did, I did half a day and I charged \$195. And so I really listened to the market went, well, this is what we need. And I was able to, and, and that's and to this day that's what we do. We add a lot of value and the price point is really reasonable for the SME market. They don't have to pay \$1,000 for the day or \$2,000 for two days. And so that's why we go to the mass. You know, it's like, it's a lot of people in a room. But we want to get as much reach as possible and we want to make it accessible to that market and you're exactly right.

So listening to them on the end of the phone going, listen, we're really struggling here. You know, it's tough and that's really what launched the business for me.

Whitney: All right, so then you have this successful event. You did it. What happened next?

Karen: Well, I just had this overwhelming sense of confidence and off I went, let's go (laughs) and I, I have to say the next, five to eight years was a roller coaster ride. Some worked, some didn't, and it was just a learn, massive learning experience.

We run an annual growth summit. We've been running that for 12 years. Um, multiple speakers touching on leadership strategy, execution and cash.

We're still learning what works and what doesn't but ultimately, we are doing the same thing. The business has evolved but we ask, we're trying to solve this problem - we try to help CEOs

solve their problems in running a business and helping them be more profitable. They don't necessarily need to grow, but it's really about, you know, giving them time and, and creating more profitable business. SMEs are the engine of any economy. So that's where we feel that we are adding value.

Whitney: And you yourself are an SME, right? So you're having this lived experience that can inform what you need to provide to your, to your customers and clients as well.

Karen: That's correct. Yeah, that's correct.

Whitney: Is there a moment, you know, two or three years in where you went, oh. Oh, was this, was this the right decision? Can you think of one moment where you wondered if it was really, you know, do I really want to double down on this or, or should I, should I go get a corporate job?

Karen: Absolutely and I think a lot of businesses kind of go like, do I, do, is this a time where I need to work harder or do I, go, I need to do something different. And I, I guess one of the most challenging times that I had was because it's interesting when you listen to your customers, you got to be very careful. So a lot of my clients were saying, hey, we want to hear from CEO's that have done it, you know, that do it that have, you know, this is how I did it. Um, operating, um, I get all the office stuff, but we want practical from CEOs. So I thought, hey, what a great idea. I'll just bring CEOs from all over the world and I'll pull a one day program together called CEO global leadership forum and it took a massive financial hit for lots of reasons.

I know now in hindsight what that was. And so I came at the end of that going, wow, I completely, um, miscalculated, misjudged, mis marketed, and I was in a, a financial, you know, mess. And I remember going to my accountant and saying, listen, you know, I said, what are my options here? And he said, well, you know, you can fold and you know call for bankruptcy. And, um, and I said, well, what does that mean? He goes, well, you could just, you don't have to worry about paying anybody back. You could just so, you know, go insolvent and move on and open up another business. And I, I kind of went, wow, really? And um, you know, I thought about that and I went back to my husband and I'm like, you know, I just, I couldn't sleep if I did that.

And I just remember the story of my, my uncle who was in business with my father and I remember him, he went through a challenging time and he said that he got onto the front foot and contacted all his suppliers and said, hey, listen, I'm going through a hard time right now. You got to give me six months and I will promise you that, we will solve this otherwise, you know, you, you won't get anything, but can you work with me on it? I was completely inspired by that story and that's exactly what I did. And I went to ... every single one of my suppliers. It's making me emotional thinking about it. And I worked through it and they were amazingly supportive and I came out of it. And, um, and it was, yeah, a really interesting time and a really challenging time. And I really started to, um, doubt my ability. And I, and I wondered if it was hubris and I kept saying, I, I was listening to the market, but you live and learn and um, I think after going through that I feel now anything is possible.

Whitney: Well, first of all I think that's incredible that you did, you went back and had those conversations with people. It shows the tremendous amount of humility and integrity.

So now, I mean you, you had this experience, you thought you were listening to the market, so, and what do you do now? So when you get a lot of information, what do you do differently now when you get this information from their market, but you're like, yeah, but I did that once. So how do you sort through those different signals that you're getting now?

Karen: I, I think experience plays a lot of part of it, but I, I source data points from lots of different areas as well. It's such a high risk business, um, when you are a promoter of business authors or, you know, um, it's experience, it's gut feeling, it's data points. Um, and we just make sure that, um, we're really clear about who our market is and what they want. So we can't actually, we can't vary far from what they want and, and the core is, you know, is it going to improve my, you know, my growth, the top line. Is it going to improve my bottom line and how's it, how's it going to impact, um, the people within my business, right?

And if we're answering those three questions and it's absolutely practical and it's education based, we can't go, go wrong.

Whitney: Absolutely. You've got the experience now and you've got the data points, right? You've been doing this for 20 years, I mean beginning with what you started in the UK. So who are some people, um, that, names that our podcast listeners will be familiar with that you've had over to, um, as part of the Growth Faculty in the last couple of years?

Karen: Jim Collins, Marcus Buckingham, uh, Tom Peters, Simon Sinek, um, Patrick Lencioni, as you know, you shared the stage. Whitney Johnson (laughing) um, Liz Wiseman. I'm just trying to think who else. Malcolm Gladwell. Steven Levitt, uh-

Whitney: So for people who want to be speakers in their careers and so, so moving from your clients and people who want to speak, because I know, um, that tends to be something that's on a lot of different people's bucket lists. You've heard a lot of different speakers. Um, what one or two suggestions do you, you give to people when they say, okay, Karen, this is something I want to do, I want to be good at. What have you observed that makes people be really good at captivating an audience and, and, and importantly in the SME market to be able to deliver content that people need?

Karen: Mm. Well, I think content is number one and so the idea that you are presenting, uh, needs to resonate obviously with the audience and unique because there's a lot of ideas out there that are variations of and so it's kind of a, an idea that kind of combines with experience and just being able to impact the audience through your idea. Um, that's, that's the number one. I mean, delivery, delivery and being able to present is secondary because if, I've had speakers on stage that are quite dry and not necessarily, um, you know, dynamic presenters, but have wowed the audience with their content because they kind of see through that.

Whitney: Interesting.

Karen: So it's, it's really, um, and so it's identifying who your niche is, it, you know, or who your market is, your target audience, you start there with your idea and being very clear about it. And then obviously the process, about how you then raise your profile because obviously there is a process around making sure that you write a book, have a blog, you know, maybe get on TED (laughs). You know, you look at Brené Brown for instance, right? And you look at Simon Sinek, you know, it is one idea, right? One core idea that they have focused on. And it's not, it's not necessarily a new idea, it's just the way it's been pitched and it's just a single, single idea.

Whitney: Okay. So great advice. And I think what I love about what you said is that it's not what people actually usually say, is that you just start with the content and delivery matters, but it is in fact secondary. If you have an idea that is important and valuable and solves the problem that people need, most people are going to give you, cut you a little bit of slack and, and allow the idea to come through and find it helpful to them.

Who inspires you, Karen? Who are people when you're like, okay, like who do you look to as role models, um, in what you're trying to do, in building the Growth Faculty and what you are doing, who are role models for you?

Karen: That's a very good question. Um, in my industry specifically, I actually look to the music industry-

Whitney: Interesting.

Karen: And I remember watching a documentary on Arthur Fogel who, and the documentary is actually called, "Who The F Is Arthur Fogel" and um, he's one of the most powerful men in the music industry. And he started Live Nation and he disrupted the music industry, by going to the bands because historically the music, the bands would come to a country and go, well, we worked with the local promoters there. And what he did is he went to like, uh, Rolling Stones or Madonna and said, listen, we will manage you on a global level and we will take you around the world. So they only had to deal with one person and, or one company. And I just thought that was absolutely quite extraordinary and had me thinking differently about my business.

Whitney: So what's next for you, Karen? I mean, you've, you've got, I suspect you've checked a lot of things on your bucket list from a business building perspective. What's, what's next? What are you excited about?

Karen: I'm really excited about our online platform, because we have now a digital product. We, we it's an online book club, so people can subscribe. So instead of just bringing out content from our, from our live events, we actually present content and interview authors on our online platform so that our membership base can get access to content more regularly. And the second thing is really kind of tapping into the collective intelligence of our CEO community here because we've got about 45,000 here in Australia and really kind of getting to the next level of, of helping them out. So, you know, areas that I'm really interested in is, is environment – how we as a business community can have impact on climate change and what we need to do and kind of how do I mobilize this group of CEOs to, to make that happen.

Whitney: Wow, that's fantastic. So really using the, the collective power of this community that you've built to, to help, um, effect some change, good change, social change.

Karen: Social change. Absolutely. That's where I want to go next. Yep.

Whitney: Hmm. Is there a person that you've had over the last couple of years that they came, they did this event and there was something that they said or there's something that they did, that it just really touched you deeply or influenced you deeply in a really meaningful way?

Karen: From one of our speakers? I know um, the year before last, the start of 2018, um, we had, uh, in the same event that you came out this year and we had John Maxwell on stage. And he talked about The Law Of The Lid and it really resonated with me because he sat there and um, he spoke about how the growth of the business is, is purely limited by the leadership capability, right? So that, the business can't grow any further than its leader. And um, he sat there he put his hand out and he, he took his other hand and kind of just kept hitting it underneath. So to say you just can't raise any higher and, and he did that for like three minutes.

And it's quite a powerful visual, and for me as a leader, I mean inherently I, I know all this stuff, but seeing him present on that, and I, I think I was at a point where, I walked away from that event going, I intent, I have to intentionally increase my ability to lead. And that visual of him on stage describing The Law of The Lid had a profound impact on me that year and now that's



my number one area for growth - a real understanding of how businesses are just limited in their growth purely and simply by who is leading it.

Whitney: All right, so you've heard him say that, that powerful image of him hitting the hand and the lid and you're limited by the leadership. What's something you've done differently after hearing him say that?

Karen: I, what I've done differently is I've decided that I needed to intentionally step into that role because, I just kind of assume that role because I had more people on my business, my business was growing. And I was just like, well, I'm, I'm a leader by default, right? Do I really, do I really want this? So what I did was I made a choice. Yes, I do want this. It's going to be hard. So I intentionally stepped into it. So now I spend time with my team on their growth, I, I reversed my role as a coach. I did not articulate that very well, but-

Whitney: Yes, you totally did. You totally did. I get it. I get it. You basically said, okay, I've been a little bit of a bystander emotionally watching myself do this and now I am actually, I'm onstage, I'm stepping into this role. And as a consequence of that, that means I have responsibility to make sure that I'm giving people who work with me the opportunity, in my language, to move along their learning curves and to raise the lid, raise the roof (laughs).

Karen: [inaudible 00:38:47] raise the roof. Thank you. You articulated that so much better than I do-

Whitney: Well, I had the chance to listen to you say it. Karen, this has been so much fun. Um, thank you very much. Karen Beattie, from the CEO, founder of the Growth Faculty and um, thank you so much for being with us.

Karen: Thank you so much for having me, Whitney. I really enjoyed that. Thank you.

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If there is one thing that all disruptors have in common, it's that they figure out a way to get comfortable with change. Even when Karen moved to Australia as a teenager, and she wasn't quite sure how to navigate this new territory-- knowing she loved travel, she wanted to help people, and that she was generally pretty adaptable---this led her to help a friend solve a problem, help bring Tony Robbins to England, and ultimately, to start The Growth Faculty. When things feel chaotic, or when you don't know what you want to do next, sometimes it's enough to just know some core things about who you are. That can be your guiding star en route to the next change.

I think it's so impressive that Karen is not only willing to take on risk, but that she instinctively takes on market risk. When she understood what problems small business owners were trying to solve, she played where no one else was playing, in launching the GST seminars, bringing small business guru Michael Gerber to Australia. It was a huge financial and personal risk. But it was the right kind of risk--market rather than competitive. And while things haven't always gone perfectly - like with the CEO series that landed her in financial trouble - her ability to pivot ---and willingness to ask for help---have given her the confidence to say "I can do this."

Finally, I really grateful Karen shared the story about John Maxwell teaching the law of the lid. Even when we're comfortable with change, it can be easy to accept what is and grow complacent. That reminder that the growth of a business organization is limited by the capability of the leader spurred Karen to actively choose to lead rather than muddle through the role she'd fallen into by default. This is something I've been experiencing personally as our team has grown--stepping into my role as a leader with intention--to walk the talk of what I teach.

Practical tip:

While it's important to listen to the audience you're trying to help and to make changes when necessary, it's also important to remember that what people *say they want* isn't always *what they actually want*. Be willing to shift gears, but stay grounded in knowing problems that cause their pain points. For Karen's audience, those are - how is this information going to increase revenue (the top line), how is this information going to improve (net income) the bottom line? And more generally, broadly, how will it impact the people within my business? What are those questions for you? For the problem you help solve? Be willing to listen, to try new things, but keep those foundational questions at the center.

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Thank you again to Karen Beattie for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Melissa Ruddy, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Nancy Wilson, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson  
And this is Disrupt Yourself.