

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 159: MARK JOHNSON

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast, a podcast where we discuss strategies and advice for how to climb the S curve of learning in your career and in your life, disrupting who you are to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson, and while I usually record my intro right before I talk to our guest, when we recorded this interview a few weeks ago, I was recovering from a chest cold. I felt a lot better than I sounded, but be prepared, because during my interview with Mark W. Johnson my voice will sound different. No relation, by the way, though it would be awesome if there were.

Mark Johnson is the co-founder and senior partner of Innosight, a strategy and innovation consulting firm he co-founded with Clayton Christensen in 2000. Previously, Mark was trained as an aerospace engineer. He served in the United States Navy as a Surface Warfare Officer.

His latest book - he's authored several - is titled Lead From The Future: How To Turn Visionary Thinking Into Breakthrough Growth, a book he co-authored with Josh Suskewicz, one of his colleagues at Innosight. Lead From The Future - today, we're going to talk about what this means, and it's why we wanted to hear from Mark, because whenever you make the decision to disrupt yourself, you are giving up what you have today for something you could have in the future, and the status quo what you have today, whether it's good or bad, is comfortable, it's loss aversion theory. We're more motivated by what we lose than by what we gain, and that's where Mark and Josh's work comes in. They've developed a process called future back thinking, a process that whether you are an organization, or an individual, this process helps make living the present a little less scary, and the future a lot more hopeful and exciting.

Whitney: So you've written this book, and it's called Lead From The Future, and you talk about a process called future back thinking. Will you walk us through what that is?

Mark: Yeah, absolutely. Well, so I think the simplest way to describe it is as it sounds, is to put yourself in the future, and most organizations plan only two to three years out. We're saying that there's actually power in planning for the long term, and putting yourself out five to 10 years, so look to the future, and there's a technique in how you actually bring that future alive, and then, walk it back in a staged way to the kinds of decisions you'd make today to try to anticipate that future versus present forward thinking which is pretty much what managers do on a day to day basis, which is to basically execute and operate building off of what's already been built, and hence present forward.

But, the challenge with that is, with present forward thinking, you are assuming that the way things will work in the future is basically an increment off of the way things work today, and as we know, in this turbulent times, and as you well know as an authority on disruptive innovation that oftentimes transformation is needed in the face of disruptive technologies, and other disruptive factors that change trajectory.

Whitney: So, present forward, it sounds like you're planning out two to three years from now, executing against what you can see today, and future back is you're thinking about five to 10 years out envisioning a future, and then, working back to the decisions that you need to make today on that basis. Is that right?

Mark: Yes, absolutely, and, and, you know, what we're trying to distinguish is that present forward is building off of what's already known, and, and it's, it's heavily dependent on the way things work today, and in, in the way things worked in the past. Future back is, another way to put it his future back thinking is clean sheet thinking, zero based budgeting, you know, ways of imagining what could be that may not have that much foundation on the way things work today, you know, hence, the idea that things that entrepreneurs create that have never been formed as businesses, corporations that can transform themselves into something that's wholly different than the way they worked in the past, such as when IBM, you know, moved itself from being a hardware, to a software, to a services company, or, you know more notably, I think in terms of truly future back work is Steve Jobs, and Apple when he really transformed Apple from a niche PC company, personal computer corporation into, you know, a vast consumer products company, disrupting many industries along the way.

Whitney: So, Mark, can you talk us through that. You, you mentioned a few minutes ago, this idea of there are some tools that you can use to see the future.

If someone comes to you and says, "Okay, Mark, I get it, right. We're part of an organization. I'm the CEO of this company, and I get what you're saying. We're really, you know, present forward focused right now. We want to think five to 10 years out. We want to do what Steve Jobs did. What are one, or two, or three questions that you would ask people just to get them started thinking about the future?"

Mark: So first, what is the time horizon for you that is uncomfortable? In terms of-

Whitney: Oh.

Mark: Yes.

Whitney: That's a good one.

Mark: Right. Exactly, right, because we, you know, back to your point about some of the biases that we face as human beings, we tend to dismiss going out too far in the horizon because we say the future is not predictable, we don't have information, you know, that is, is going to be credible

about the way things work. You know, we've got too many things to worry about today, so planning out, you know, five to 10 years for most organizations is quite uncomfortable, and so, one of the exercises we put through people is to say, what is the right time horizon to begin thinking future back? Is it five years? Is it seven years? Is it 10 years? Sometimes it could be less than that in a very fast paced software company, but typically five to 10 years gets to your discomfort zone, and what you're looking for is to get past the noise of the planning horizon, and get into further out, and start talking, and discussing with, you know, fellow leaders in your organization. You know, what could disrupt us? What are the early fault lines? What are the faint signals, you know, related to technology trends, or socioeconomic trends, or, you know, kind of classic strategic planning, but, but more conscious of this time horizon, and pushing it further out? And, by using potential points of inflection that could happen in the future whether they be points of inflection that can be threats to the sustained growth of the business, or I think, more exciting, and more often the case, what are those opportunities to be seized to begin planting seeds now for? The first, I think, interesting step here is to begin talking about a time horizon that's worthwhile in beginning to think about how things might be.

Whitney: So, a question for you, so you said that's the first question you ask people, and I'm going to ask you two other questions that we ask, but when you think about that time horizon for you, what is that time horizon? Is it five years? Is it 10 years for you and your business?

Mark: I think for us, we are probably as a professional services firm, you know, maybe there's our own issue of, you know, the cobbler's children don't have shoes but maybe we could be pushing it further out, but we've, we have been five plus years. We've been looking at our sort of our future in a six to seven years. I could argue, you know, if we were really honest with ourselves that there be reason to push it out even further, but it is far enough for sure for us to have productive conversations about the art of the possible, both to our peril, and also, to our, you know, to our potential renewal, and, you know, creation of new growth. So, yeah, I would say we've, we've easily hit the five-year, six-year, but there, there could be an argument to say we should even push it out further.

Whitney: So, you're definitely eating your, your own cooking, so, so that's, that's good to hear, so-

Mark: At least tentatively (laughs)

Whitney: Okay. Yeah, okay so first question was what time horizon makes you feel uncomfortable if someone comes to you and says, "Mark, I need your help. What's another question that you would ask people immediately to get their brains going where you need them to go?"

Mark: So the other is to let's try to, as a thinking, you know, kind of as a mental exercise, you know, really do our best to not, to not be thinking about the way things work today, to clear the mind to this idea of being able to think in a, you know, and again, in a clean sheet, you know, ask questions like what could be? As opposed to, what is? You know, be ready to, to your point. You know, ask questions, as opposed to give answers, because the answers are going to be built off of what can be easily achieved by saying, no, this is the way it works today. Trying to do things around the future, you know, it's going to be more assumptions driven, so being prepared to develop assumptions as opposed to depending on facts. You know, being ready to have a creative mindset, so that, I think that would be, the second part is to make sure that the way we're going into the future, you know, with foresight to develop an insight is, is done without recognizing we don't want to let today's, "Structure dictate strategy," as Alfred Chandler, a business historian said at the Harvard Business School.

You know, we want to, we want to lead with the future and the vision for it, and then, determine what does that mean for our business as opposed to here's the way our business works today, at least as the next step, and then, and then, I think once you go into that future, you know, the

other part of it is then the process of actually developing a point of view about the way customers, your target customers or consumers, what, what is going to be important for them to try to get done, right? It goes back to, you know, what do they really need? What's going to be important for them.

And so, there's a process as a second major step of being able to say, in this five to 10 year horizon, typically, that's uncomfortable for most organizations, and based on the trends, and things that you can talk about these early warning signals, and inflection points, what does that mean for your target markets, and your target consumers customers in terms of what they'll be trying to get done? And, there's a process for being able to begin to develop those customers' needs, and what's going to be most important in their life.

It's all fine to think about the future, but what does that actually look like when you take it into a company? Mark and I talked about how this was implemented at Johnson & Johnson, and their pharmaceutical division, Janssen. As they thought about the future, they imagined what a future that was free of disease would look like and how they could get there. Here's what Dr. Bill Hait, director of Janssen said:

"In the not too distant future, each of us will know the diseases to which we are susceptible. An ecosystem of passive biosensors and trackers - like the step-counters on our smartphones - will monitor our biometric signals, and the equivalent of a check engine light will turn on when something inside of us begins to go 'out of spec.' In many cases we won't be sick yet - but we will be at risk. Society will demand new types of solutions to address these risks, and the company that creates them will be the next Johnson & Johnson."

Dr. Hait went on to say - we're already Johnson & Johnson. We have the best minds in the world coming up with cures when people get sick. Let's now think through what it would mean to create a diagnostic like this. And in that future, they would no longer need a business plan centered around a pharma division. Let's think through how we can make money in a different way.

Mark: So what Johnson & Johnson did was looked around, and created a vision that was about 20 years out at the time, and they imagined what a world without disease would look like, which I thought was incredibly inspirational, and you know, noble for a company that is so dependent on its core pharmaceuticals.

And they, they came up with a few initiatives today that they could move forward into the future. One of them being a lung cancer initiative, working not just with pharmaceutical division of Janssen, but with the medical device division at J&J and begin to think about how patients that have lung cancer, you know, that how could you find early ways to detect the formation of cancer pathology of tumors that could form, that could be intercepted much sooner so that the likelihood of, of overcoming the disease would be much greater, and they've made incredible progress, and the ability to actually make this into something that's viable, both in terms of what could be actually implemented in different hospital, and healthcare systems.

But also, something that they've now devised as a potential that actually could be sustainable in terms of an actual business for J&J with the combination of being able to sell a device.

Whitney: You know, what's interesting, Mark, when I hear you talking about this idea of future back thinking, and then, you know, is this notion of once you've got the courage in some ways to think about the future, or maybe, I think it's part courage, but also, the muscle to think about the future, what could be, what will it look like to move into that discomfort zone as you described it. Then, if you're willing to do that, if you've got a really strong school of experience, you've got a strong muscle around present forward thinking that can actually serve you really well, because there's a lot of skills involved in present forward thinking that can be used to walk you back from the future once you're willing to go to the future. Do you find that to be true?

Mark: Oh, absolutely. Coming up with, you know, a whole new vision like Bill Hait's, and teams, world without disease, to your point, walking it back and I think more importantly, moving it forward as an initiative is done in a present forward way. The core business, which is critical to sustain the ability to go and think about the new and different is a present forward endeavor. It's about executing and operating, it's about sustaining budgets, it's about moving forward, you know, with product development, and that's 90%, we would argue. 80 to 90% of, you know, leadership's and other parts of the organization's work, we would just say, how do you carve out 10%? You know, maybe depending on the circumstance, maybe it's a bit higher to the pursuit of imagining what will need to happen beyond the core, you know, to begin to think about future opportunities, and how that could impact the shaping, and evolution of the organization over time.

Whitney: I'm thinking about a, a CEO of a company that I was meeting with just yesterday who is very good at the present forward, and his, his co-founder is actually very good at the future back, and so, they make a great, great partnership, because they have this yin and yang ability to do the future, but then, they can present, you know, come walk it back, but then, also present forward into the future, and so, it's just really interesting for me to think about that, and I guess the other question, or wondering that I'm having as we're talking is you said, you know, sort of 10% future back, and then, 90% present forward.

If you're an entrepreneur, you're running a business, you know, a smaller business, it sounds like you in many cases have to have both muscles, and so, what you're saying I think is - need to have both muscles. You've got to just, if, if you'll even spend 10% of your time thinking about the future that is going to hold you in very good stead as you're thinking about, you know, the present forward strategic work that you're doing.

Mark: No, that's absolutely right, and to your point earlier about the CEO that you met who's very present forward oriented, I think there are definitely people who can grasp the, the idea of, of being more around future back, which is really a process of exploration, and envisioning, and discovery versus, you know, present forward, which is more of a process of operations and execution, and, and I think finding people that can do both, and, and recognizing that there's some people who are very good at execution operation as you know, and delivery and you talk about this all the time in your podcast, you know, who should keep doing what they're doing, and not necessarily be forced into, you know, being part of the future back effort of an organization, and others who are more, you know, more about creating, being creative, and explorative, you know, they can comprise the folks who help in the future back aspect of creating this balance between, you know, present forward that's predominant, that's again going to be kind of 90% of the effort, and then, those few, and those others that can help, you know, connect to the core organization who are part of this future back effort who have an innate ability as well as probably experientially, you know, the effort around exploration, and envisioning, and discovery, which is a more of a creative process.

Whitney: Yeah, which goes to my next question is, in the, in your book you said, and I'm quoting now, "The picture of the future that you develop will have to feel as real to you as anything in your purview." So, my question for you is how do you get people in this emotional place that they

need to be to go into this discomfort zone? What are some things that you do, you know, we all love the jobs to be done theory. We're talking right now about this functional piece, but there's also that emotional piece of how do you get people to go emotionally where you need them to go?

Mark: Well, I think what we've found is that by just spending the time, immersing yourself in the future, and having a debate, and a discussion, allowing individuals in a conversation to diverge, and then converge, and getting excited about insights that would have never formed had they not spent the time in the future, creates an emotionality in and of itself. Because they're just things that come up that, that would have not been thought about had you not spent the time envisioning what the future could hold.

And it usually creates an excitement, whether it's a threat, or an opportunity. On the threat side, it's like, boy, now we see it, now we can do something. On the opportunity side, of course, it's like, well, this is really exciting. You know, we have an opportunity to create something new and different that could be part of, you know, part of sustaining our growth.

Whitney: I'm remembering a conversation that I had with Rob Nail about a year ago. He was the former CEO at Singularity University. That's very like to get, you know, how people come in, and think about the future, and one of the things he pointed out that was interesting to me, and I think this dovetails with what you're saying is, when we think about the future, we tend to think of it in a very apocalyptic terms. You know, and, you look at films about the future, the futuristic films, and the world is going to end, and so, there's this fear of thinking about the future, and one of the things I think he suggested, and I think what you're suggesting is when you can get people to say, "Look, let's just talk about it."

When you start to imagine all of the wonderful, and amazing things that could happen with your business. If you can set aside the fear for just a moment, and recognize that you could consider an apocalyptic future, but in fact the future could be as bright, in contrast to that, but there's this opposition, or opposite to that and merely getting people to have the conversation, that can also be true with any of us is we say, we know it feels a little bit scary, and yes, sort of the popular culture has led us to believe that, but in fact, if you'll sit down, and we'll, we can talk about it, you'll see that the future can be very bright as well.

Mark: Well, that's very well said, Whitney. I couldn't, I couldn't agree more strongly about, you know, about that point of view. Our experience has been the opportunity is greater than the threat. In fact, one of the urgencies about, it's interesting, it's a little bit of a, a paradox, right? I'm saying an urgency about thinking about the long term is, is the point about opportunity cost, right? The cost of not thinking about the future, and the potential opportunity that could be lost by not planning now for it not allocating resources toward it, I think is the bigger miss for so many companies than, you know, that they're going to get, "Disrupted." I think it's, it's unfortunate that you know, that so many companies don't factor in what's the opportunity cost of not thinking about what beyond the core growth could be, and the best way to do beyond the core growth is to have a longer term planning horizon to be able to bring that to bear.

Whitney: Right, and this goes back to the loss aversion theory that we talked about at the very beginning. The work that you're doing, this future back thinking is it's helping people understand, if you're thinking about this from an equation standpoint, that the cost of sticking with the status quo is actually much higher than we are calculating currently, and the revenue could also be potentially much higher as well, so it helps you shift that equation in your mind.

Mark: Absolutely, and, you know, and I would say, and I'm sure you would agree just in the, in the circles that, you know, that you travel, and who you talk to, that this is becoming a bigger problem, you know, this whole point about loss aversion, and other kinds of biases are just

getting worse as there's just more noise in the here and now. There's just faster change in technology, there's just more ways to have disruption take place. It's almost like the more volatile, and uncertain things get, the more we hunker down into the here and now, and so, there really is a call to action for organizations, not just businesses as I mentioned, you know, government, nonprofits, educational institutions. All of these organizations need to think about how do they get past all the noise of the here and now, the tyranny of the urgent, all the things that can just pull us from right to left, you know, in an amount of time that prevents us from putting any effort into thinking about our long term future.

Whitney: So, one of the things that's been interesting for me is to reflect on this idea of lead from the future, or future back planning. For me as I'm thinking about the S curve of learning framework, it's this idea of being willing to think about what does that next S curve of learning look like for you, and where are you going to jump next?

But then, the question I have for you is I think about your business, you personally, you're on your current S curve, so of course, we're always going to want and need to think about the next S curve, but I look at you, and I think you're probably in the sweet spot of that S curve, and I'd love to have you share with us what that looks and feels like, and the reason I'm asking that question is that one of the things that we've found, I think this goes back also to the work that you're doing, is that when people are on the launch point of the S curve, they're in some sort of pain, because they're trying to figure stuff out, so they're, they're at the very beginning of that present forward strategy, "How do I do this? It's really uncomfortable." But then, you've also got the people who were saying, "Well, let's try to figure out, or I'm at the top of that S curve, and it's time for me to do something different, and I don't know what that looks like." So, they're in pain.

But, when you're in that sweet spot of that S curve, whether personally or as a business, professionally, because everything's working, we actually don't even notice that everything's working. We're just, it's comfortable, and so, what I would love for you to do, and there's obviously no right answer here, but just reflect for a minute, for a person, for a business right now, it looks to me like you're in this sweet spot, what are some of the opportunities and challenges being in this place?

Mark: Wow, that's really an interesting question, Whitney. I had never really thought about it personally. You know, and I know you've written about S curves before, but I never applied it to your point, and I think you're spot on. I do feel like we're in the sweet spot. I'm in the sweet spot, but I also think with my colleagues. You know, what it, I think what it feels like, it, there's a couple things. One, you know, if I may, you know, step back a bit, trying to put this together in terms of this book *Lead From The Future*, and again, as a, you as an author know how painful it can be to write a book. I mean, it can be so liberating, and can be so joyous when you've completed it, but when you endeavor to, to write, and put down your thinking, at least for me it can just be extremely painful.

And, I knew we had been working with clients a long time on the process of future back, but how to form it up into the right way to convey, you know, all the things that were needed to, to bring it alive. You know, not just the process, but the thinking, you know, how do you develop this in organizations, you know, in a way that it's not just a one and done? All those things took a lot of time. It took a lot of reflection. I think in many ways I was practicing the process of future back of just trying to envision what this book could be, what it should be, you know, a lot of fits and starts and how to get there, and, and so I described it in my own mind, just like we described with clients on doing a future back effort as a messy process.

You know, it's very iterative. It's three steps forward, and it's a step backwards, but in that process of being messy, and iterative comes the most important component, which is individual,

and organizational learning, and there's no more powerful learning that comes having iterated, and reflected, and refined, and explored a whole host of times. In fact, one of the things that came out, you know, as an underpinning of all this, you know, future back thinking, and process was what we described as a learning loop, which is probably, you know, nothing new in the context of management. I'd probably word it a different way, but basically, the learning loop is first you need to explore, then you envision, and then, you discover.

And, I think what's exciting is being in the sweet spot of the S curve is we're just on this fast pace of being able to, you know, even if you don't look in this five to 10 year horizon, just constantly being able to explore new conversations that help envision, you know, what could be, and then, how do you bring that back to a set of experiments to discover this ongoing process of exploration, envisioning, discover, which was applied to the development of the book. You know, just the way we've applied it to clients. You know, it was just a very exciting time, because it's, it's one thing builds on the other.

And I think to your point, when you're starting the S curve, you don't know exactly where to explore. And then, how to build on, you know, what you're going to envision based on that exploration in which you're at the tail end of the S curve, there isn't a whole heck of a lot more that you feel you can explore, you know, so the power of the visioning within that existing curve, you know, doesn't, doesn't bring enough to the table, and hence why you probably need to jump on a new S-curve.

Whitney: What's interesting, Mark, when you said that, what I picked up on is this idea of explore, envision and discover, and so, what I think I hear you saying is that now that you've done all of this work, you're in the sweet spot, and in the sweet spot, you're in a place where there's a lot of discovery taking place, because you know enough to be able to say, "Okay, what do I see? All right, now let's, let's, let's test this, let's iterate it." So, you know enough, but not too much, and I think that's what I hear you saying, which I think is a really interesting way to think about it, is that when you're in the sweet spot of your learning, your most primed to be very discovery driven as we have learned from our, our colleague [Rita Gunther McGrath](#), is to be very focused on being discovery driven, which is a very exciting place to be because you've got enough wherewithal that you can, but again, you're not bored, bored, so bored that you don't want to.

So that's an interesting place. I love that. Okay, so Mark, where can people find you if they want to engage with you further? What's an easy way they can buy your book obviously, [Lead From The Future](#)? What else can they do to find you online?

Mark: Well, the other easiest way is, just go right to [Innosight's](#) website to, to www.ideosight.com or directly to, email me directly at mjohnson@ideosight.com. I'd love to hear from your audience.

Whitney: Oh, excellent. Those, you're making it simple, so all right. Any final thoughts that you'd like to share as we wrap up?

Mark: I just, first of all, just appreciate to have the time to chat with you. I think the final thought that I would have for everybody is, the ability to do this work, of future back, and to be able to envision, and feel that it's eminently doable starts by simply doing the work of putting yourself in the future and beginning to explore so that you can then envision, and I can say from experience, that if you simply go out into the future, and practice being able to explore, and then, envision, you will gain insights from your foresight, if you will, that will put in your mind thoughts, and ideas that will excite you, and that quite frankly, will permanently change you, because once you have these insights for yourself, or for your organization as Bob Johansen another futurist from the Institute of The Future says, you know, "You can never go back."

And, I think that's what I would just have as a final thought is simply try it. Put yourself out into the future, and make the effort to envision, and you will see hosts of new insights come out that will be very important for your sustained growth as an individual or an organization.

Whitney: Thank you, Mark, and I can't help but think when you said you never can go back, but you can go back to the future, and that's what I'm hoping that we will do for those of you who are old enough to know what I'm talking about. Thank you, Mark Johnson for being on the podcast with us today, and helping us think about how to think about the future, so that we're willing to disrupt ourselves in the present. Thank you again.

Mark: Thank you Whitney.

The idea of future thinking might seem overwhelming or might seem impossible right now. We know that things like COVID-19 that were possible (we've been warned for years about the possibility of a pandemic) but not probable or expected can sideline any possible plans we may have, but that shouldn't stop us from thinking ahead.

As Mark and I discussed, we often fear the future or fear the unknown? But why? It's paradoxical that we hide our heads in the sand when it comes to thinking about the future. Because the people who know that there is a deadline are the people who live with purpose and create and grow, as we discussed with [Tom Rath in his episode](#).

Things will end. But that doesn't mean there won't be a bright future. To think further on this topic, you may want to also listen to our episodes with [Kaihan Krippendorf](#) and [Rita McGrath](#). Really consider the future. What it will be and what you want it to be.

Now, a word from our sponsor. Which would be me, and our team.

As people are finding new rhythms and aren't commuting or able to go to the gym right now, you sharing the Disrupt Yourself podcast and taking the time to leave 5-Star Ratings and Reviews on [Apple Podcasts](#) helps more than ever. So, I want to take a moment and read our review of the week from ANomad:

Great interviews with interesting people. Whitney's authenticity and humility about her own blindspots/learnings/mistakes adds to the value of the learning process facilitated by the conversations.

Thank you ANomad, and yes, it is important to me to walk my talk, so I appreciate you acknowledging that.

Thank you again to Mark Johnson for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, managers / editors Macy Robison and Melissa Ruddy, content contributor Nancy Wilson, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.