Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 173: OZAN VAROL

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 professional, and personal life. Disrupting who you are to slingshot into who you want to be.

I'm your host Whitney Johnson, and today our guest is Ozan Varol.

Ozan, is a case study in personal disruption. He's a turkish emigre, trained as a rocket scientist, pivoted to practicing then teaching law.

And now he's an author, podcaster, and speaker.

The thread that runs through each of these iterations is always questioning, always disrupting.

Ozan, recently published a book titled *Think Like a Rocket Scientist* in which he cross pollinates his science background with business, and leadership, a book which Adam Grant, one of our recent podcast guests described as a dazzling debut.

Houston, this book has solutions.

Ozan, thank you for joining us today.

Ozan Varol:
Thank you so much for having me, Whitney. I'm delighted to be here.

Whitney Johnson:

So, I love this idea that you're playing with the concept of being a rocket scientist. I remember when I was working on Wall Street, and we may have even talked about this when you invited me graciously onto your podcast of when I was, you know, working as a sales assistant, basically, a secretary. And there was this bullpen, and they're trying to get everybody to open up these stock accounts. And they said things like, ...doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that this makes sense to buy.

So, I love that you're playing with this idea. Can you just talk about sort of the back and forth that you probably had with your editors around this title and how it came about?

Ozan Varol:

Sure. So, as you said, Whitney, we tend to sort of put rocket scientists into their own corner, and assume that rocket science is reserved for these geniuses, right? Hence, it's rocket science, or it's not rocket science. And I wanted to write a book that busted that myth. And I wanted to write a book, not about the science behind rocket science, but actually the process of thinking like a rocket scientist.

So, I opened the book with the story of John F. Kennedy stepping up to the podium in September, 1962 at Rice University Stadium, and pledging to land a man on the moon before the decade was out.

That promise that Kennedy made was quite literally a moonshot. A lot of the people in the audience thought that Kennedy was out of his mind. And even some of the officials at NASA were wondering whether he was seriously proposing what he had proposed. Because so many of the prerequisites for a lunar landing hadn't been developed yet

So, we jumped into the cosmic void, and hoped that we would grow wings on the way up.

(NATS: KENNEDY)
"And, therefore, as we set sail we ask God's blessing on the most hazardous and dangerous and greatest adventure on which man has ever embarked. Thank you"

Ozan Varol

As we know, the ending of the story, Armstrong took a giant leap for mankind in 1969. And a lot of people look at that story, and assume that was a triumph of technology, or a triumph of science. But really it was the humans behind the technology, and the humans behind the science, and a certain thought process they used to turn the seemingly impossible into the possible.

So, I wanted to write a book that captured that thought process and applied it to everyday life because that's what I've been doing ever since I left rocket science is taking these concepts and applying them in seemingly unrelated fields like law and, and business. So, in the book I take just nine simple strategies from rocket science that anyone can use to make their own giant leaps in work and life, whether it's landing your dream job, accelerating your business, or creating the, the next breakthrough product.

Whitney Johnson:

Hmm. That's really interesting to hear that there was so much that when he made that bold claim, like you said, it was a moonshot. And there some of the technology, some of the material science wasn't even in place at the time. It was a very bold and daring statement to make. Do you think he had any sense of what a leap he was making when he made that claim?

Ozan Varol:

I think so. and I'm sort of speculating here, but he must have talked to other officials, other experts about whether or not, this daring promise had even some possibility attached to it. And of course, he was assassinated just a year after. So I do think that he saw the gap between reality and dream, but I think he had confidence in his people in the, you know, very capable rocket scientists working at NASA to be able to bridge that gap.

I think a number of factors were involved, of course. We're trying to beat the Soviets to the moon. So, a lot of financial might was thrown behind the project. But I think on top of that too, we pivoted to long-term thinking. So, instead of chasing these short-term outcomes, which are so common in politics and business these days, we gathered together as a nation, and looked, dared to look just 10 years ahead. And what a difference that made.

Whitney Johnson:

I'm wondering, so you open your book and talk about this story. I'm pretty sure that you were not alive when that speech was given, but when you do think about the speech, when you do think about a person landing on the moon, anything in this that really inspired you to study science, to study engineering, study physics? And how did you connect with that emotionally?

Ozan Varol:

Yeah, I was not alive when JFK gave that speech. I was born in 1981.

Whitney Johnson:

I was pretty sure you weren't.

Ozan Varol:

But I know I certainly watched the speech, and I read about it growing up. So, I grew up in Istanbul, Turkey. And Turkey didn't have a space program. So, what I learned about astronomy came primarily from American sources. We were living in a small apartment in Istanbul and would get blackouts really frequently. And when I was four or five years old, this would, these would terrify me. So, my dad came up with this game, he would take my soccer ball, he would light a candle, and then he'd rotate the soccer ball around the candle. And the soccer ball was the earth and the candle was the moon. And those were my first astronomy lessons. And I was hooked. I bought every astronomy book I could get my hands on. I found the original cosmos series by Carl Sagan. And I would watch those on our old beta max player. I had no idea what Sagan was talking about (laughs) because I didn't speak any English, but I sat there and listened to him anyway. And along with that, of course, science fiction books, but those were my inspirations growing up. And my dream was to come to the United States to study astrophysics because Turkey didn't have a space program. And I ended up at Cornell at 17 as an astrophysics major.

Whitney Johnson:

I love that your father said, "You know what? I'm going to figure out a way to make him not be scared." And it was that constraint his creativity and his innovation that led your fascination. And I think I'm never going to forget now that lovely image of the soccer ball being in the earth and the candle being the moon that is just, that's beautiful.

So, you've got a classic disruptive story. you are an immigrant to the United States and I think, you know, immigrants are disruptors. I mean you're basically leaving everything you know, to start over. scientists then law professor, author. Sometimes people ask me, how do you know when it's time to disrupt yourself? How do you know when you're at the top of an S curve of learning? Like, how do you know? And I'm just wondering, as you've done all of these different disruptions from making the decision to come to the United States, from leaving science to go into the law to become a professor, to become an author, is there any sort of feeling or signal, or sort of talk that was happening in your head that sort of said, "Okay, Ozan, it's time to jump." Any thread that you can think of?

Ozan Varol:

Hmm. I think two things came to mind as you asked that question, Whitney. So, the first with regard to, to leaving Turkey, and coming to the United States for, for college, you know, Turkey's an amazing country, my parents still live there. But one of the dissatisfactions I had about the system there was how deeply conformist it was. In school, I remember in first grade we were assigned numbers, and our teachers will call us by our numbers. So, we weren't Ozan, we were like 154.

Whitney Johnson:

Hmm.

Ozan Varol:

And that was just a, you know, just one example of the level of conformity that existed. And the way I was built just didn't mesh well with that system. You know, I'm very creative. I try to blaze new trails, and a lot of this goes back to how I was raised by my parents. But there was just a deep disconnect between the system that I was operating in, and how my parents had raised me. And so that was the reason I left and decided to move to the United States, the primary reason.

So that, feeling of disconnect I think is one thing that I watch out for when I determine whether or not I should stick in a certain field or disrupt myself and, and move on to something else.
The other variable that comes up is when I find myself getting bored.

Whitney Johnson:

Hmm.

Ozan Varol:

That, that feeling of boredom usually goes hand in hand with a number of other variables. One is that learning stops. So discomfort stops completely. All of my days begin to resemble the ones that came before. Right? I'm just sort of cruising along, doing what I did yesterday. It's very comfortable. I know, I know exactly what I'm doing, but I'm not failing. I'm not making any mistakes. And that means I'm living smack in the middle of my comfort zone.

Whitney Johnson:

Hmm.

Ozan Varol:

And so those are the two things that I try to watch out for. And I've learned over the years that I need to be really attuned to my body, and my thoughts to be able to pick up those feelings because it's really easy to lose sight of them. Usually, they don't come screaming at you. They come up as like this flicker, right? You're like, "Oh, I'm sensing something here. What is that weird feeling that I'm feeling?" And so, I've found that journaling really helps with that in terms of trying to identify those feelings to determine when it might be time for me to try something new.

Whitney Johnson:
Ozan listens to his body and his mind. He is aware and attuned. And, did you notice what he said about disconnect? If he begins to feel disconnected, or bored, this signals to him something's happening on a much deeper level. That maybe, it is time to move on to something else. Ozan knows to stay engaged, to continue to grow, he needs identifying and scaling his next S Curve. He needs to learn, leap and repeat.

Ozan Varol:

That connection between brain and body is something that I discovered probably in the past year or two. I've always been operating from my rational brain and thinking that anything of importance is going to come from there, but I've become much better at listening to my body. And reestablishing that connection has actually been really helpful in it picking up that flicker when it does arise.

Whitney Johnson:

You made a comment about your parents when you were talking about, you know, number 154, I'm never going forget that. The good news is that 154 does add up to 10. So, that's good.

But, the question I have is you've made a comment how my parents raised me. One story come to mind that really captured, or captured the sort of the ethos of your parents?

Ozan Varol:

I was I think four years old or five years old., around the same time that my dad was teaching me astronomy lessons using my soccer ball and a candle, and I was about to start kindergarten. And the way that it, the system works in Istanbul is you have your pick of public kindergartens in your area, and that might be like six, basically. And what my parents did was they went to all six, and they picked out three that would be the best for me.

And then they came home and said, "Well, it's time for you to start kindergarten, and we're going to take you to three kindergartens. You'll get to pick which one you want to attend. You'll get to ask the questions that you want to ask in terms of, so, think about what you might find important in a kindergarten." And, and they took me to all three and like, you know, of course the things I found important at that age were like, you know, what kind of toys do you have?

And what kind of books you have? Anything that I was interested in. And in the end, I made the choice. So, I picked the kindergarten that I was going to attend. They gave me so much autonomy at that early age to make decisions for myself, and really trusted me also to make that decision. And of course, they had done some safeguarding beforehand by picking the three that they thought would be most appropriate, but that moment has really stuck with me. So, they made me believe that anything is possible. You know, if you have a dream, don't let anyone tell you that you can't do it, just go and chase it. And both of them at various points that told me, "You can't win the lottery without buying a ticket. So just go ahead and try. " And that's been my guiding philosophy from a very early age

Whitney Johnson:

Ozan, that is so beautiful. It actually brought me to tears. I could feel my eyes welling up. Just this sense that I had of this, this cute little five year old boy, and you saying to your mom and dad, "Okay, here's where I want to go."

Ozan Varol:

Yeah.

Whitney Johnson:

And that sense, like you said, of autonomy, that you were an actor in your universe and the power that that gave you. Have you told your parents thank you recently for that?

Ozan Varol:

Oh yes, many, many, many times.

Whitney Johnson:

Oh, good. I'm so glad.

Ozan Varol:

Yes. And they're thanked expressly in the book for giving me my first astronomy lessons.

Whitney Johnson:

Oh, good.

Ozan Varol:

Yeah.

Whitney Johnson:

All right. we talked about, you know, rocket scientists, and we as society, we think that you're smarter than we are and so I'm wondering, you know, when you hand that to a person over and over again, you're smarter than me, you're smarter than me, you're smarter than me. That can creep into your psyche. And so, I'm wondering, what do you do to counter that?

What are some things that you do to just kind of check yourself when people start sort of privileging you in a way that you're like, "I probably don't deserve it." And just how do you handle that? What, what do you do?

Ozan Varol:

I love that question. This happens a lot at speaking events, right?

Right before I'm about to get on stage, and I'm being introduced, and it's always like, "He's an expert of this, and the bestselling author of that, and he's done this, and you can ... " I- it basically gives the impression that he can do no wrong.

And then this mental voice comes in and says, "They're talking about an image of you, a mannequin of you, not the real you. The real you is deeply imperfect and deeply and beautifully imperfect, the real you is and always be a work in progress." And there have been moments in my life where I totally fell in love with that image, you know, of being an expert at, at, at fill in the blank. And then I realized whenever I call myself an expert on anything, I begin making confident declarations without gathering all the facts. And the moment I think I've made it is the moment that I stop learning, and, and growing.

There's a chapter in the, in my book called *Why Nothing Fails Like Success*. And I, I remind myself of some of the cautionary case studies that I tell in that chapter as well with respect to, for example, the Challenger in Columbia space shuttle disasters, which happened basically, overgeneralizing a little bit here, but because NASA had a string of successes that led the, you know, the most capable managers to develop tunnel vision. They thought that if they simply follow the process that led to previous successes that they could do no wrong.

Spaceflight, you know, when Kennedy gave a speech during the, the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo missions, it was very much viewed as a work in progress. And we never lost a crew in space during that really risky period in spaceflight. It was the moment that spaceflight became "routine" with the advent of the space shuttle or sending astronauts to space frequently, and NASA began to view themselves as, you know, as a finished product, and spaceflight had become routine. That's when disasters started happening. So, I try to keep that in mind as well when I when I find myself in that zone of, that danger zone of thinking that I've made it.

Whitney Johnson:

I love what you said, a deeply imperfect human being. I've been thinking a lot about this idea of, of entitlement, and, this treating people as objects, not people. And the big Aha that I had was that so often we think of that in the sense of we think that we are better than other people, and what you were having to combat. It also though happens where we think we're less than other people.

And so, it's interesting how in that moment you had to say to yourself, "I'm a deeply imperfect human being." So, that you could make sure that you were continuing to see the people in the audience as people. But the audience, and when we sort of hand that to someone, we're saying, "I think you're better than I am." And then they're competing somehow. And so, you stop being able to have a conversation where you can connect as human beings. And just, it's just interesting to hear you talk about that. Most people struggle with this, "I don't feel as good as ... " And you've sort of had to say, "Well, how do I make sure that I don't feel better than?"

Ozan Varol:

Yeah. And one of the, one of the other things I do when you do have that disconnect between the speaker, and the audience is I share my failures and vulnerabilities with the audience at appropriate moments. Because I do think that makes me more relatable and my message more relatable. Because if I just got up on a stage and just pretended to have all the answers and you know, pretended that I could do no wrong, I think I would lose the audience.

But if I share those imperfections, if I share those mistakes, and failures with the audience, then it becomes much easier I think to connect, as you said, Whitney, as people to people as opposed to people versus audience, which, you know, just inserts this disconnect.

Whitney Johnson:

Mm-hmm

Ozan Varol:

And I think it undermines the power of the message as well.

Whitney Johnson:

What is one of your marquee failures, and, you know, where something just did not work the way you thought it was going to? What did you learn?

Ozan Varol:

After I graduated from law school. And one of the most prestigious things you can do to jump start your career is to get a federal clerkship. And I got a federal clerkship at the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco. And usually from there on you, you go into and practice law. But there was another avenue available to people who are like the cream of the crop at the very, very, very top of, of the legal field who are recently out of law school. And that's clerking with a justice on the United States Supreme Court.

And so, that was my moonshot. My dream in law school was to clerk on the US Supreme Court, the highest court in the land. And I got an interview with Chief Justice John Roberts. I should preface this by saying, you know, with every interview I had ever had at that point, I walked out of the interview thinking that I had bombed it. Like I made some sort of grave error that was totally going to cost me the job. Which turned out not to be the case, but that was like my impression walking out of every single job interview I had ever had. I walked out of the interview with Chief Justice Roberts thinking that I had nailed it. And then my attitude completely shifted. So, I went from wanting to clerk on the Supreme Court hoping to clerk for the chief justice of the United States to expecting that I would get the job offer.

Whitney Johnson:

Hmm.

Ozan Varol:

And of course, you know how the story ends. I didn't get the clerkship, and I was devastated. And I was devastated in large part because my expectations were so high. I was so focused on the outcome, completely neglecting, like not only the process of this amazing moment, 45 minutes I shared with this brilliant legal mind, but also just assuming that the universe owned me something.

Whitney Johnson:

Hmm.

Ozan Varol:

And the universe owes you nothing. And the message that I got from that failure was exactly that. It's okay to want things. It's okay to, to hope for the best. But once you start expecting the universe to deliver results, you're in big trouble.

Whitney Johnson:

Huh. Interesting. So wondering, and have you ever given some thought to this is, is there some part of your journey, your life journey to date that you would have missed out on if you had gotten that clerkship with the Supreme Court?

Ozan Varol:

I would not have met my wife.

Whitney Johnson:

Hmm.

Ozan Varol:

I think that, and that is a huge, ... So, whenever I, people ask me if I regret not having done something, I tell them no because I had to be at a very specific place at a very specific time in Chicago in 2011 to meet Kathy. And so my life probably would have turned out very differently, and certainly for the worse if I have, if I had gotten the clerkship because I think it would have launched me just in a different direction. And I may not have been in Chicago on that date. And so I always keep that in mind. It's very hard to see the silver lining in a failure when you're going through it at that moment. But the silver lining usually becomes clear years down the road sometimes when life connects these dots for you. And you realize in hindsight that what you thought was a curse was actually a blessing.

Whitney Johnson:

Hmm. That's lovely.

Whitney Johnson
It can be challenging, at best, to see the road ahead through the fog of failure. But, as Ozan shared, "the silver lining eventually becomes clear as life connects the dots for you."
What insight! Too often, we get stuck in our stuff, planting our feet in the disappointment of the moment. But... if we see failure as an opportunity to improve, we are leveraging this painful moment for our gain.

Ozan missed out on a supreme court clerkship, what he saw as a once in a lifetime opportunity – but in reality, not getting the clerkship led him to the real once in a lifetime opportunity - meeting his future wife.

Whitney Johnson:

All right, so let's go back to science for a minute. On the surface it appears to be very linear. You have a problem, you find a solution, you've got this scientific method. In your book, you debunk this process, or de- debunk this idea, I should say, by looking at the process of problem solving? Tell us more.

Ozan Varol:

Yes. So, let me begin with this part about linear thinking, and why we assume that that's the case, right? If you have a problem, as you said, Whitney, and then you find a solution. And I think that comes in part because of our education system. There is one curriculum, one right way to study science, one right formula that spits out the correct answer on a standardized test. You've got these textbooks with like lofty titles, *The Principles of Physics* that magically reveal the principles as if they just arrived by a stroke of genius. But you don't see the messy reality behind the glamor, right? You, you read about Newton's laws as if, you know, they arrived by grand divine visitation, but not the years that he spent exploring, and revising, and tweaking them.

And by the way, the laws that Newton failed to establish, like he was really into alchemy, and was trying to convert lead into gold, and he spectacularly failed at that, those don't make the cut as part of this one dimensional story that we tell students in classrooms. So, the scientific method is, is very much one of failure, and one of making mistakes. So, Albert Einstein's first few proofs for E equals MC squared, failed. I tell the story of the first three launches of SpaceX, Elon Musk's space company which were spectacular failures.

Elon Musk was, 2008 was a bad year for a lot of people, but it was terrible for, for Musk because he was basically on the verge of bankruptcy. He was borrowing money from friends to pay for, for rent and, and everything was banking on this fourth launch of SpaceX, which ended up succeeding, which then ended up getting SpaceX a $1.6 billion contract from, from NASA. So, the way that science works is, you know, you come up with a problem, you think about ways of reframing that problem. So, asking a better question as opposed to immediately jumping into answer mode. And then you try different hypothesis. And some of those hypotheses don't work, and others are going to work. And that process takes sometimes years, and years of effort, and sometimes it expands beyond a single scientist lifetime.

But failure is very much a part of the story that often doesn't make the cut. Breakthroughs in science but in other fields as well are evolutionary, not revolutionary. You're not going to succeed in achieving something transformative on the first try. And we have this obsession with grand openings in society, but the opening doesn't have to be grand as long as the finale is. And so, as long as you're learning from each mistake, and this is a big gift, by the way, a lot of people don't learn from their mistakes, and don't learn from their failures. But as long as you're learning from each failure, and each try, each iteration is better than the one that came before it you'll end up going so far in life.

Whitney Johnson:

So, Ozan, what are you iterating around right now in your life?

Ozan Varol:

Hmm. Well, I spent the last probably five months iterating around different ways to market and promote my book. So, that was my, my big experiment. And I was trying various different things because it was so new for me. I wrote an academic book before, but this was a, my first nonacademic book, a mainstream book. And so, I try so many different strategies to get the word out about my book. And of course, when we, when the pandemic hit in February and March, all those plans had to be scrapped. And I spent ... And I should mention, you know when that happened and when my book tour got canceled, I spent two days just feeling devastated and wanting reality to be different than it was. And, then I realized I wasn't thinking like a rocket scientist.

And I went back to my training and I said, "Okay, like rocket scientists, one of the things that they do is to focus on the variables that they can control and ignore the rest." Wanting something to be different when you can't change anything is a profoundly useless exercise. It's like tugging at a plant to make it grow faster, right? It, it can't happen. What's far more useful is, "Okay, well, I can't control what happened, but I can control how I respond. So, how can I take what I had plans and pivot to a different format? How can I take my skills and resources and everything I had built up over the past, you know, four or five months in terms of book marketing, and apply them in ways that I hadn't envisioned before?"

And so, one of the things I did for example was to try virtual events. I did a number of like virtual book launch events with other authors whose book tours were also canceled. And they ended up being really successful. And probably actually if I'm being honest with myself, more successful than an in-person book tour, which would have been more limited, and it would have been much more taxing on my time because I would have had to fly to New York, and D.C., and San Francisco, and whatnot. And I realized, you know, some of the things that I was doing myself were actually not how a rocket scientist would approach the problem.

So I was basically with the books tour, for example, just looking at what other authors had done before me. And assuming that if you're coming out with a book, you go on a book tour, not because it's a good idea necessarily, but

because that's what authors do, which isn't a good reason to do something. And so it made me question some of the outdated assumptions that I was operating under, and ask myself, "Okay, the universe dealt us this hand, instead of wishing for a different hands, what can I do to respond? How can I come up with better, and more creative ways of, of getting the word out instead of, you know, being miserable that reality turned out to be different than I had hoped?"

Whitney Johnson:

It's interesting isn't it? Because you, like you said, you have all this training, years and years of training, and it got put to the test in a very unexpected and unasked for way. One of the question, I actually have a couple of questions coming up for me. The first is you talk a lot about brainstorming in your book.

And can you just talk very briefly about what brainstorming is as you're defining it. Because everybody has a different idea of what it is. And then how is that, how did, how is that integral to thinking like a scientist? And in particular, how did you apply this as you had to, to rethink how you were going to launch your book?

Ozan Varol:

So, before brainstorming happens, and so, the typical way that I think we think about brainstorming is people sitting around the conference room, and exchanging ideas. And that's I think only a part of the story, and a misleading story if we want to bring out the creative best in people. The way that scientists usually work ideally is they start out by working in isolation. And so, that means they are struggling-

Whitney Johnson:

Hmm.

Ozan Varol:

... With a problem on their own and they're spending large amounts of unstructured time free of distractions thinking about that problem. The free of distraction part is a very important piece of this equation. Many of the stories I tell in the book about how scientists came up with these revolutionary ideas that seemed to come out of nowhere, they happened in moments of boredom when they were just sitting. Einstein was playing his violin, when Werner Heisenberg was walking through a park in, in Copenhagen. There are so many stories of actually of scientists just literally walking into the right answer.

And so, and they're not listening to podcasts. They are not, you know, checking their phone. They're just walking alone with their thoughts, and letting their subconscious connect these dots., and so to go back to a word that I used earlier, it just came up again, and you had highlighted that it would, and it was, is flicker. A lot of these insights, revolutionary insights come up as a flicker. And if you're not paying attention, if you're too distracted, you're not going to be able to notice them. So, that's the first part of the equation.

You ask a good question, you labor over the answer intensely, and then, and then you're stuck with it for days, weeks sometimes, sometimes years. But that's not the entire story because then once you start coming up with ideas, the scientific method also requires you to share those ideas with the scientific community to get their feedback.

Whitney Johnson:

Hmm.

Ozan Varol:

The story of the lone genius is a myth. Now, we tend to fetishize the lone genius working away in their garage, like Steve Jobs building the first Apple computer. But that is a myth. It makes for a good story, but optimal creativity doesn't happen in complete isolation. Breakthroughs almost always involve collaboration of some sort. Isaac Newton famously said, "If I have seen further, it is by standing upon the shoulders of, of giants."

And so, the idea is to cycle between moments of isolation, and interaction. And research bears this out by the way. Cycling between those two mental states of working alone, so, brain writing by yourself before brainstorming, and actually sharing those ideas with other people tends to bring out the, the creative best in, in different groups.

Whitney Johnson:

If you could, as you think about this pandemic, are there one or two concepts or stories in your book that you think are especially relevant given what's happening right now, even more so than when you first wrote the book?

Ozan Varol:

Yeah, so I think it, a couple of things came up. The first is this idea of focusing on what you can control, which is something that we already, already talked about. But I do think that's, that's really important. I think there's a lot of right now focusing on things that we, we can't control, which also has a side effect of producing quite a bit of, of anxiety and, and panic. So, if you can say to yourself, or if you can ask, "How can I use my skills, resources, products to solve the problems that the world needs to be solved right now, as opposed to the problems that I want it to solve?"

" ... As opposed to the problems that I thought I would solve?" I think that's a really important question to, to ask because ... And I should say, you know, human beings are really afraid of uncertainty for evolutionary reasons, primarily. But we are also really adaptable., we are really good at switching if we actually step back, and ask ourselves these, these questions of how can I deploy my resources in a way that, that I haven't used them before? So, you're far more adaptable than you give yourself credit for. And as you're asking that question, keep that in mind.

The other is, is this concept that I talk about in the book the distinction between two-way doors and, and one-way doors. So, whenever we're leaping into the unknown, making a decision that's new, thinking about, you know, pivoting to a different field, or taking a different job, we assume that if things don't work out as we planned, life as we know it is going to come to an end.

That turns out to be a faulty assumption. So, we assume that our decisions are way doors, but they're, in fact, most of our decisions are two-way doors. You can walk into a room, have a look around, and if you don't like what you see, you can always walk back out. And not always, of course, I'm exaggerating a little bit, but in most cases you're able to walk back out. And the example from my own life, one of many, when I was practicing law and I wanted to go into academia, and that was something that I was thinking about even when I was in law school. At first I assumed that that decision was a one-way door.

Like if I left the practice of law, and went into academia, there would be no turning back. But that is a faulty assumption. And so I took this two year temporary teaching job in Chicago where I met my wife. But you know, and the reason why I pulled the trigger, and why I made that leap was because the practice of law was always available to me. If I didn't like academia, I could always go back. And so if you're thinking right now about pivoting, and trying something new, which I think a lot of people are, ask yourself, are you looking at a one-way door or a two-way door?

Whitney Johnson:

Hmm.

Ozan Varol:

And if you do think you're looking at a one-way door, think about whether there's a way to convert it to a two-way door. One of my favorite stories on that is Richard Branson starting Virgin Atlantic. Starting an airline is a really risky, very expensive investment. Most airlines fail. So, it looks like a one-way door decision. But Branson took what looked like a one-way door decision, and converted it to a two-way door by striking a deal with Boeing that allowed him to return the first plane he bought if his airline didn't take off.

And so, if you are looking at a one-way door, think about whether there's a way to convert it to a, to a two-way door. And right now I think is, you know, if you're privileged enough to be healthy and safe to be working from home, I think it's a great time to be doing some experiments. So, trying new things, questioning assumptions, and, I would encourage everyone listening to do that.

Whitney Johnson:

Hmm. So, you know, one of the things I love about that is, I have throughout my life if people ask me, you know, how do you know if you should make a decision or not? Like if it's a right decision. And in my brain I always have this image of if it's a good decision for me to make in my mind's eye, I can see doors opening up beyond that initial decision. And if it's not a good decision, I see doors closing. And what I love about your image is this idea of one-way or two-way doors, and this flexibility of, you know, walking kind of, you know, at my grandmother's house, those doors that swing back and forth. There's something very vintage about that as well.

Ozan Varol:

Right.

Whitney Johnson:

And just a, a lovely image. And, and like you said right now, the need but also the opportunity to have there be two-way doors because people and we all in general I think are more flexible right now and typical-

Ozan Varol:

Mm-hmm

Whitney Johnson:

... And so, we have the opportunity to build two-way doors more so than probably as usual is my guess.

Ozan Varol:

I agree completely with that. And I think them the best way to figure out, related to, again, this, this doors analogy that we keep building on, is if you've got multiple doors in front of you, and you're not sure which one to open, often, you know, you can't, you can't determine what the right choice is beforehand because you're just, you don't know what the consequences are going to be. So, it pays off to place really small bets, and open multiple doors, right? You don't have to sort of quit what you're doing, and then leap into the unknown.

You can open, peer into these doors, and see what's inside by conducting limited experiments, and trying things on the side, which I've done throughout the course of my life. And some of those experiments are not going to work, and some of them will. But you don't need all of your experiments to work, you know, one or two things that do work, compensate for the, for the dozens of ideas that don't take off.

Whitney Johnson:

Hmm. So, Ozan, where can people find you if they want to learn more about you, and your work, and where can they buy your book? I guess, as a starting point. But beyond that, how else can they connect, and, and get to know you and your work better?

Ozan Varol:

The best way to keep in touch with me is through my weekly email. It's called the Weekly Contrarian. And you can sign up for that by heading over to weeklycontrarian.com. It goes out to over 21,000 subscribers every week. And then my book *Think Like A Rocket Scientist* is available wherever books are sold. If you head over to rocketsciencebook.com/disrupt, I have two bonuses for you, for your listeners, Whitney. One is a just 30 minute video training with a behind the scenes look at my productivity systems. And then the other is just 10 short bite sized videos, three minutes each that I recorded with practical insights from Think Like a Rocket Scientist that you can apply in your life right away. And so, those bonuses are at rocketsciencebook.com/disrupt.

Whitney Johnson:

Oh, I love that. So everyone, he tailored it just for you. That is fantastic. So, Ozan, it's been so fun to have you on. Do you have any final thoughts that you would like to share with our audience?

Ozan Varol:

As you're asking the questions that, that we talked about before in terms of what you can do in this period of uncertainty and questioning assumptions in your life, I encourage you to go back to the discussion we opened with Kennedy stepping up to the podium at Rice University stadium to aim just a little bit higher in your life. Because we are a species of moonshots, and we've been conditioned by society that small dreams are wiser than moonshots. That coasting is better than soaring.

And I think if you can aim just a little bit higher, you don't have to literally shoot for the moon, but if you can aim higher than you otherwise would have that what a difference that can make. Because even if you fail, you'll fail above your previous success, and that farther away, or farther along at a higher altitude than you otherwise would have if you were aiming low.

Whitney Johnson:

Hmm. I feel inspired. Thank you, Ozan Varol, for being our guest. It has been really a lot of fun, interesting, instructive, and as I said, inspiring.

Ozan Varol:

My pleasure, Whitney, thank you so much for having me on.

When we think about jumping S Curves, we often think about planning them out perfectly with the right timing – taking control of new trajectory.

But, let's face it, that doesn't always happen.

We are not always in control of when we disrupt.

But, even in the midst of the anxiety of a forced disruption …Ozan's story reminds us that we can take a step back and think about how we can use our skills and resources to solve the problems the world needs solved right now, not the ones we thought we wanted to solve. Even though we, as humans, chafe against change – we've actually evolved to be very nimble and adaptable. Let's use that.

That's the forced disruption. What about when we are in control of our jump? Think about the signals our bodies give us when it's time to make that move…. That boredom or disconnect with our work. These are important signals. Pay attention to them.

I also really liked the imagery Ozan used with the doors – something I think about myself when I'm considering new opportunities. But, Ozan pushed the metaphor further talking about a 2-way door – one you could go through but also come back out, if you don't like what you see behind it. It reminded me of a vintage swinging door in my grandmother's house. It's a great way to think about that next big decision. You have flexibility.

Finally, I loved the idea we **all** can think like a rocket scientist if we give ourselves the space to really think. That means turning off the distractions – going for a walk, do some thinking on paper – brainstorming with colleagues. So that we can be open to flickers of inspiration.