

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 200: GIVE FAILURE ITS DUE

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, a podcast where we provide tools and strategies on how to climb the S curve of Learning™ in your professional and personal life, stepping back from who you are now to slingshot into who you can be.

I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. And because this is Episode 200, it's time for another solo episode. A continuation of our series, where we do a deep dive on the framework of personal disruption.

In Episode 180, we talked about the fifth disruptive accelerant, step back to grow. In this episode, we're talking about the sixth accelerant, give failure it's due, which is often a huge step-back. We'll first set the context, explaining why failure is hard. We'll then focus primarily on the refrain, telling lots of stories along the way so that when we make mistakes and we will, we'll call it not as we sometimes see the experience, but for what it is, an opportunity to learn.

So let's set the context.

The up and the down are part of personal disruption. You can mitigate risk, but failure happens. We know intellectually that at the point of failure when something doesn't work, this is often where the greatest learning takes place. But the truth about failure is that it doesn't feel good.

It goes against our biology.

The organizational anthropologist, Judith Glaser, said, "Whenever we're in a tense situation or meeting and feel that we're losing ground, our body makes a chemical choice about how best to protect itself." In this case, it's protecting itself from the shame and loss of power associated with being wronged. In terms of neurochemistry, our brain is being hijacked by our amygdala, our lizard brain. She says that a failure is signaling to our brain that something isn't working. We're in a battle, we're about to lose, so we move into fight mode.

Fighting against what's happening, we come up with reasons why we weren't wrong, why it wasn't our fault, that it didn't work, instead of moving into a place of humble inquiry where learning can take place.

The more successful you are, historically, the more trouble you may have with failure. According to research from Carol Dweck, best known for her research on the growth mindset, she says that kids who were smart in school tended to tie their identity up with doing well. So if you did well, you were labeled as "smart" and therefore

worthwhile or worthy. If you didn't do well, you were "dumb," worth less. So, even small, seemingly inconsequential failures can feel like this loss of identity. No one is immune. Look at Steve Jobs, iconic founder of Apple, always unveiling the next insanely great product. He was also the despairing founder, curled into a fetal position, sobbing on a couch in an unfurnished house when the Apple board fired him in 1985. J.K. Rowling, billionaire author of the Harry Potter books. Just a few years after graduating from university, her marriage failed, she was jobless with a young child, diagnosed with clinical depression and contemplating suicide. She would later write, "Rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life."

Now, I want you to listen to a brief clip from my interview with entrepreneur James Altucher, who self describes as, "I've started a bunch of businesses, failed at a bunch of businesses, and succeeded at a few of them." He provides an interesting glimpse into the ups and downs of personal disruption.

Whitney Johnson: What's an example of when you lost everything and you burned all your bridges?

James Altucher: Well, one time I sold a technology company and this is kind of like in the Internet boom. And I made it...

Whitney Johnson: So 2001?

James Altucher: 1998, I sold the company. I made a lot of money, but by 2001, I was totally broke. So I had lost millions of dollars. And not just on paper. Like many people that I lost... I cashed out and then I didn't know what I was doing and I just spent it and lost it and never made it again. And I mean, I've since come back. But I mean, at that time, that money I lost. And not only that, you realized, or I realized really quickly that all of my new friends were, were, you know, I don't know what the word is, but they were, they were fast to go once I no longer was, you know, "I'm a king of the hill." So, so I had no friends. I was losing my home. I lost all my money and I needed a new career, like nobody was returning my phone calls anymore.

Whitney Johnson: How did you feel when that happened?

James Altucher: Oh, it's, it doesn't, it does not feel like a new ending, a new beginning is starting. It does not feel like that. It feels like all hope is lost and there's... I have two choices. I can either deal with this pain and anguish, and I know it's going to take a while or I could kill myself and cash out on a... have my kids cash out on a four million dollar life insurance policy. So fortunately, I didn't do the latter. Of course I did the former, obviously, because we're sitting here and it just feels horrible. It feels like, "What am I going to do? I'm just going to lose everything." And at the time, you know, we all live and die by metrics, for better or worse. And at the time I thought my net worth was my self-worth and my net worth was essentially zero or specifically at the low point \$143. And it's by the way, it's much better to be millions of dollars in debt because then you have like...

Whitney Johnson: Oh, interesting.

James Altucher: Because debt could be converted into an asset in various ways, but to actually have \$143 and that's it. Nobody cares at all. Like the banks don't care, your friends don't care, just nobody cares.

It was very trying and I figured, "OK, I have two babies, two children, and I literally cannot afford my life." Because I had ramped up my lifestyle beyond belief when I had, you know, millions of dollars more. And I sort of have this big belief that creativity is a muscle. And so if you were, if you were in, let's say, a bicycle accident and you had to lie in bed for two weeks while you were recovering, you would literally need physical therapy to walk again because the leg muscles would atrophy so quickly.

Whitney Johnson: Right.

James Altucher: And it's the same thing with the idea of muscle or the creativity muscle or whatever you want to call it. If you don't use it, you lose it. So I started writing down 10 ideas a day. They could be bad ideas, good ideas, ideas

for books, ideas for businesses, ideas for things I wanted to invest in, ideas for gifts I wanted to give my wife so she wouldn't hate me forever for losing all this money, could be anything. You know, and if you come up with 10 ideas a day, you're not going to come out with ten good ideas because that's 3650 ideas a year. You'll come up with maybe one or two good ideas a year, but you start to build that idea muscle. So, once I figure out an idea that I want to try, I'll start coming up with execution ideas. And this gives me little experiments to try out the idea. Is this going to work or fail? Most ideas won't work, but at least I've experimented with some execution ideas. And bit by bit, by doing this, I started to come up with my next career at that point.

Shame and vulnerability expert, Brene Brown, who you heard on the podcast last year, has said that, "In professional sports, the military and corporate life, when ethos is kill or be killed, control or be controlled, failure is tantamount to being killed."

This is certainly played out in my life. I've gone to speech in front of hundreds of people. I've been fired and back to business that imploded. The speech I bombed, they didn't like it. They hated it. And I have all the comment cards to prove it. When I was fired, I was in the depths, devastated, rejected, wondering if I would ever recover. And the business that I invested in that went under, how could I claim to be a savvy investor?

We applaud failure, but the dirty little secret is that it makes most of us feel at least a little bit ashamed. The problem is that when you buy into the shame, you allow the failure to become a referendum on you, on your identity, on your sense of self, your sense of worth, which is just plain wrong. Failure doesn't limit disruption, shame does. I'm going to say that again, because I want you to remember this.

Failure does not limit disruption, shame does.

All of us have some shame. Some more, some less, if it's debilitating, please see a therapist.

If you want to gain momentum along your current S curve or any S curve in the future, ditch the shame. It's not to say that when something doesn't work, you're not sad. It's important to acknowledge the sadness, to talk about it. Psychologists who study recovery from trauma say that mourning without empathy leads to madness. Part of working through the sadness is having someone to give testimony of it too. We need someone to bear witness to our loss. Not just when a loved one dies, but when a dream dies, like when I was fired. What's interesting is that I wanted to contain it, but I couldn't. The grief just spilled out. It was only through that in the telling and the hearing that I healed in part because I let people into my life in a way that I hadn't previously. The author, Sue Monk Kidd, said, "There is no pain on earth that doesn't crave a benevolent witness." When we start to acknowledge failure as part of the process of becoming a high growth individual, what we saw as a constraint becomes a tool of creation along our S curve.

So here are some things to think about... Under what circumstances is failure a data point that allows you to improve? And under what circumstances does it trigger shame and become about your identity? When things don't work, do you give yourself a chance to grieve, to mourn the loss? And how have those losses helped you draw closer to the people around you?

So we've talked about why it's hard to fail, the importance of ditching shame, and acknowledging the sadness. Now, I'd like to share a few stories. The first is from Maren Kate Donovan, who was the founder and former CEO of Zirtual that went from rapid growth success to shutting down seemingly overnight.

Here's what she had to say...

Maren Kate Donovan: In San Francisco, there's a lot of good, but there's also a lot of groupthink in terms of "grow at all costs." You know, you can always raise money if you're growing. And I think I kind of bought into that without really understanding what it meant. So, we were growing, but we were... our unit economics were in the red. We were growing, selling, adding more people, but every new user we added cost us more than we made. And that's most San Francisco, but that's most venture backed businesses for a time. But the problem is to do that, you have to

have a pretty hefty war chest. And we didn't. We kept just trying to get profitable. We didn't raise a lot of money considering how many people we had. So, we literally grew broke. We got to a point where even though the demand was high, we, our unit economics were upside down. And when we realized it, we needed a bridge round and the investors were kind of like, "Eh." They all got cold feet at once and because of that, we had to, to sell the assets of the company and let everyone go.

So, it was really unfortunate. But again, you learn a lot of things in retrospect. A few months after Zirtual had collapsed and I was still just kind of recovering, I also went through a breakup of my long-term boyfriend. We were living together. So at some point I was just like, "Oh my gosh, I literally am at zero. Like, I have hit the bottom. There is nothing else." And I went to L.A. and was staying in a friend's condo and just kind of laying on the floor. I remember it, one day, just staring at the ceiling. And I realized I was like, "You know, there's there are two types of people in the world." And it sounds super corny to say this because, like, there are people and you meet them every day that are broken for a really big reason or for maybe a reason that you don't, you know, you find silly. But there are people that have had experiences in life and they let it break them. And then there's people that no matter what they've gone through, you know, small or huge, have used those experiences to make them stronger.

And they have scars. And, you know, it doesn't mean they didn't happen, but they refuse to be broken by what's happened to them. And they just, you know, keep getting back up. And I realized that I didn't want to be a person that was broken by things. And I just wanted to be a person that no matter what came at me, I would always get back up. And if you make that choice and kind of take that ownership, even when things happen that are completely outside of your control, it gives you more control, in a weird way.

Maren Kate learned, like James Altucher, that she could get back up. She describes her experience at Zirtual as a five million dollar MBA. Today, she's a partner at Avra Talent, a recruiting firm. That's the experience of an entrepreneur.

Let's now learn from someone in corporate America. Ten years ago, Scott Pulsipher, now president of WGU, the largest university in the United States, was working at Amazon. He was charged with launching a new product. It wasn't going well. Here's what he had to say when I interviewed him...

Scott Pulsipher: When you own a business at Amazon, you have to go through your annual review and then you present your operating plan to Jeff Bezos and his S team, as it's called at Amazon. And it seems very ritualistic too, because you are responsible for writing your operating plan and it reviews your performance from the last year, as well as what you're going to do the next year. And our, my first review of that was in pretty sure as October of 2010. So we launched just seven, eight months prior in February of 2010.

And it was not going well. I mean, we had missed a lot of requirements. The ease of use and the challenges that we had presented our customers with were challenging enough that, as I remember remarking that seven out of ten customers hated our product. I knew going into the review that, you know what, the performance is, what it is, and it's not good. And there's no one for me to look at and say, "Well, I only on the product." You're like, "No, I own the whole thing." So and some of the decisions were made before I joined around some of the design, etc., but I had to be accountable for the whole thing. And so we presented, I think as matter of factly as we could have, what worked, what didn't work. This ritual exists where you have to sit directly across from Jeff to his right or left will sit the CFO at the time was Tom Cuttack, and your finance business partner sits across from him. Your SVP, or your boss, like Tom Taylor in that case, I think it was actually Sebastian Cunningham still, at that point. That person would sit next to you as well. And then all of the SVPs would sit around this huge table.

There may be 30 people around this table, right? And so after they've done reading because there's that silent reading hour, there's about 2, 2.5 hours ff where then it's just questions and answers and you're just sweating it because you've read your document a million times. And so you do all that prep, but we had one fundamental issue, which is our business wasn't doing very well. So I had to convince them that, "Listen, the strategies are in the plans, right. We just haven't executed very well. But I know what I'm doing. We know what we're doing. We're going to get this done right. Here's our what our priorities are and here's how we're going to get this back on track with what it

should be." After the readings done here, Jeff will then say, "All right, are we going right or left?" And all he really means is which direction of the questions going to start, because he always goes last. And so all the other questions going to get out on the table, the issues already coming up, you know, etc. But it gets to Jeff and one of his first comments were, "This is one of the worst three performing businesses in the whole of Amazon." And you're just kind of like, "All right." So... And it was very challenging. I had to somewhat emotionally separate from the whole thing because you had to go... I personally had to go through this mental and emotional exercise to realize that regardless of what Jeff feels or says or does about web store as a business, it doesn't change who I am.

It doesn't reduce my own confidence in my ability to do what I need to do. It doesn't mean that my prior 15 years of experience or for not, you know. It didn't, for me I had to recognize it didn't, didn't diminish my own self-worth. And we started to recognize that even as important as these things in business are and how it affects the individual lives, it's not as important as other things are. And that even if this opportunity for me didn't work out, it doesn't mean there wasn't going to be another opportunity. And so I mentally had to go through that process of just recognizing that, you know what, he could fire me on the spot and I will still be OK. I had to kind of go through that mentally and emotionally to where the anxiety level for me came down enough such that when I was actually in the meeting that I could sit with my back straight, that I could confidently and well-reason respond to the questions that were being lobbed at me, that I could continue to articulate a clear sense of what our priorities were and everything else.

I had two probably objectives. One is to clearly signal that we had learned from the mistakes that have been made, that we had rectified or, or clearly now laid out a strategy of and a plan of things to execute that was going to get it back on track. And third, that I had the backbone as a leader and an owner to actually accept both the mistakes, but also lead the thing going forward, that my team had not lost confidence in me, nor should any of those executives lose confidence in my ability to write this thing. The other reality was, is that after his kind of question and answer period and really kind of addressing his concerns, the question was posed like, "Do you have the right strategy and the right plan and can you execute?" And his answer was, "You have the right strategy, you have the right plan now. Now you need to go execute." And when he said that we then committed and said, "To prove to you we can execute, we'll meet with you every other month or once a quarter until you're confident that we're executing the plan that needs to be executed."

There are a number of important lessons to pull from this. Number one, once the mistakes were made, he was willing to own up to the mistakes and that's huge. Number two, Scott needed to look for the lessons to be learned in making those mistakes to own up to them and then learn. And then number three, he had a boss who allowed for those mistakes to be made.

That reminds me of a story from Ed Catmull, the former president of Pixar. They were working on Toy Story, someone pushed a button on a keyboard, causing 90 percent of the work completed in the past two years to be lost. Backup systems weren't functioning. There was no way to restore it. Fortunately, an employee who was working remotely, on maternity leave, had it on her computer and restored the files.

They corrected the backup measures. They never tried to find out who had precipitated the crisis. They didn't even spend a second doing that. Catmull says that big mistake should be treated the same way as small mistakes. Don't look for scapegoats. People afraid of punishment won't be able to create. Are you creating an environment where the people around you can make mistakes?

Let's now go back to my business that went belly up. It was about 15 years ago. We had a friend who wanted to start a magazine. It was called Organize Magazine. At one point, circulation was up to 100,000, but ultimately it failed. Not so much because print media was being disrupted, they didn't get far enough, we didn't get far enough along for that to be an issue. It failed because, I, in part was naive and arrogant, a dangerous combination. So what did I learn? Well, I learned that I need to put my family's dreams first. Don't get seduced by other people's dreams, including being humble enough to listen to the advice of my husband, my truth teller. He didn't want to proceed. I did. I now listen when he says, "Danger, danger Will Robinson." Second lesson I learned was put boundaries in place, including proper legal documentation. It's OK to say that we're friends, but let's still put it in writing. Good

fences, make good neighbors. I now put things in writing even when it's painful to put things in writing because it seems like I'm being difficult. And third lesson I learned, only invest what you can afford to lose.

It's not just about learning lessons along the way. It's about the right kinds of lessons. Eric Reese, in the Lean Startup, describes this as validated learning. You ask yourself what valuable truth did you discover about your current and future prospects by failing? Sometimes there's an actual failure, like bombing a speech.

Which I'm grateful for because it got my attention. I then did the work to deliver speeches that are not just good and solid, but are at times, not only instructive, but inspiring.

The... Frequently the failure, it's not a failure at all. It's just we didn't meet our expectations. Let me tell you about Prakash Raman. Prakash played division one tennis in college. As a young teenager, he was one of the best players in the United States. What surprised me when I met Prakash is that when I asked him to tell me his story, we were having a conversation about personal branding. He didn't say anything about having played tennis. When I later learned about his tennis career, I pressed him as I do. He then said, "I didn't share this because I wasn't good enough to play professionally."

A mini version of this happens all the time. When there's a gap between expectations and reality, shame often oozes into that gap. It wasn't the reality that was the issue. Prakash played division one tennis, but it was a shame that he felt because he hadn't lived up to his expectations.

Fast forward Prakash is a highly sought after executive coach, formerly an executive development at LinkedIn, who coaches around and has the experience to back it up. Lessons like successes built on habits, not outcomes. Sometimes failure is an indicator that you're on the wrong S curve. Vince Lombardi said, "Winners never quit." Seth Godin said, "Winners quit all the time, they just quit the right stuff at the right time." When you pursue a disruptive course, your odds of success are six times higher, but that's six percent to 36 percent, which means there's always going to be a 64 percent chance you're on the wrong curve. And while you're at the launch point of the curve, it may be that you just need to persevere, sometimes it's the right decision to disengage from that curve. When you don't give up on goals that aren't the right goals, there are health implications potentially leading to heart disease, diabetes and early aging. And that not, not giving up when you should like beating your head against the wall when you should stop will make you less, not more successful.

Winners know when to quit.

What I'd like you to do now is think about a recent failure.

What assumptions did you make in the process?

Which ones were right on, which ones were off? What feedback were others willing to give you? And if they weren't willing to give you feedback, why? What do you now know that you didn't before, and how will this help you climb your current S curve? Finally, what went right? Brandi Chastain, a two time Olympic gold medalist soccer player, said, "You're going to make mistakes in life. It's what you do after the mistakes that counts."

Let's go pick back up on the thread that we started with Scott Pulsipher and Jeff Bezos and Ed Catmull, which is what do you do when someone on your team makes a big mistake? Sometimes things break down and there are consequences. Someone may need to be let go. You may need to reassign them. But frequently, failure is the point where it's important to give and receive encouragement, to say to yourself and others, "It's OK. Start over. Try again."

Here's an example of what it could look like. Feyzi Fatehi, the CEO of Corent Technology, shared the story with me when I interviewed him for our podcast. He said there was a senior member of his technical team, we'll call him John. He asked to initiate, negotiate and manage a high stakes strategic partnership. This is part of his development plan. He got the go ahead. But it was a fail. In part because John made big investments without validating his assumptions. In part because he hadn't identified the actual decision makers. Because John wants to succeed and because Feyzi, the CEO, has created a culture where people have the leeway to experiment, the cost of this failure was reframed as an investment in John's development. An investment in learning how to structure strategic

partnerships. An investment in the company's future. When someone on your team makes a mistake, think like a stock picker. We all like momentum and the promise of potential, that's when we buy. When momentum slows, we sell. But if you believe in a stock, when there's a hiccup, sometimes stocks get whipped around for reasons completely unrelated to business performance, you don't sell, you double down. You buy more if your original investment rationale is still intact. The same should be true with people. When there's a glitch, a mistake, we're tempted to sell. But before you do, figure out if the underperformance is actually a failing. Maybe your expectations were unrealistic. Maybe you are making a judgment call too early. Typical six months, the low end or the launch point of the S curve can feel like a long time. Maybe this person has what it takes and they're just in the wrong role.

See if you can relate to this example.

Jocelyn Wong studied engineering before going to work at P & G in manufacturing. This is what her father wanted for her and she wanted to make him proud, but she felt trapped. Jocelyn worked hard, but she just wasn't that good at her job. Rather than giving up on her and firing her, her boss connected her with Diane Dietz in marketing. Dietz saw her not as a failure, but a person with promise, just on a different S curve. It turns out that Jocelyn was indeed very good at marketing. She has since gone on to become the Chief Marketing Officer at Family Dollar, the CMO at Lows, and now she is the Chief Customer Officer at late stage startup, goPuff.

Continuing the stock picking analogy, sometimes we might be tempted to sell a particular S curve and give up our current path, but sometimes, lots of times the better decision is to buy more to patiently double down. The practical, tactical question you may have at this point is how do I create an environment where it feels safe enough for me to experiment?

It's all about framing. In this case, framing the expectations for the people that you report to. For example, Stacey Petrey, who is a compensation expert and VP at Bausch Health Companies, suggests the following script to use with your boss or your boss's boss:

"I can take direction X, Y, Z. There's an 80 percent probability that it will work, but there are risks. It's also a stretch assignment for me. Win or lose, it's the right risk to take from a business and people development perspective. The team and I will give it our all to succeed, but if we don't, will you back us? Will you support me and the team through this risk?"

Many of us forget to frame expectations, be honest about the risks, but also focus on how taking them can benefit the company, your boss and you. It's usually a bet your boss is willing to take. So the next time you're speaking to your boss about undertaking a new project, whether you think it will work or not, practice using the script, "I can take this direction. It's likely to work, but it may not. There are risks. It's also a stretch assignment for me or for one of our high performers. Win or lose, it's the right risk to take. Will you back me?"

In general, it needs to be psychologically safe. In interviewing Amy Edmondson, a professor at Harvard Business School, we discussed what psychological safety looks like at different points on the S curve. At the launch point, you have the challenge of, "I'm new around here, I feel a bit inadequate, insecure." How do you speak up and say, "I don't know how to do that? Or why do we do it this way?" For the leader that wants to make it safe for people to bring their whole self to work, which includes the part that aspires to be better and to contribute, she suggests you say something like, "Hey, you're new around here. You're not supposed to know anything yet. So your questions, they're gems. They're valuable. We want them all. You're doing yourself and the community a favor by asking your questions."

For people who are approaching the high end of the S curve, a place of great competence, she suggests that you keep reminding them, "We as an organization could easily get blindsided by a better actor, a competitor, so I need you to be willing to try stuff out, to be willing to fail." Just keep reminding each other, "You and I are fallible." And she says, "Remember, a sense of humor goes a long way."

That's something that I learned a little bit more about this year. In March 2020, when the pandemic hit, I felt like I needed to do something to create calm amidst the chaos, to help people around me feel calmer. I felt like I should hop on and do LinkedIn lives. There was just one little problem because it was going to be every day, initially it was

every single day for 16 days straight, then moved to two days a week. But because it was going to be every single day, there was no way it could be scripted. That meant I was going to make mistakes.

What was I going to do? Only way through it was to smile and laugh when I made mistakes. And I took my inspiration actually from Livingston Taylor. We had him on the podcast earlier this year and he said something that was so profound for me. He's obviously performed his entire life. His younger, his older brother is James Taylor. And he said that, "When you are on stage, if you will forgive yourself, then others will know that you will forgive them, too." I loved that. And so one of the best ways I know to forgive myself when I'm speaking, when I'm talking to other people, when I'm doing anything, is if I make a mistake to laugh and smile.

It makes a difference.

Everyone calms down. I calm down and the shame that can creep in, that can ooze in, like we talked about earlier, that gap between reality and expectations. It dissipates. The humor sends that gremlin away.

So as Amy says, "A sense of humor goes a long way."

Regardless of where people are on the S curve, be willing to ask questions. They're very powerful, Amy says, in creating safety because they indicate that someone actually wants to hear your voice. Whether you're the boss, a team member, you can practice with questions like, "What can I do to help? What are you up against? What are your concerns?" That the person you are talking to matters is implicit with these lovely little questions.

All right. So, you're framing expectations, which is good. You're making it safe for people to fail. But once the failure actually happens, in addition to not scapegoating, in addition to keeping your sense of humor, what do you do? Well, I like to look for the R-O-F, the ROF, or the return on failure.

Here are some questions you can ask. Number one, why did the failure happen? What process wasn't in place or could be improved? Number two, was the failure due to a lack of effort or were people just trying something new and it didn't work? Number three, is this person failing? Are they making mistakes because they're in the wrong role, they're on the wrong S curve? Number four, are unrealistic expectations, partly to blame? Could expectations be managed differently? Number five, how quickly will you and I recover from this failure? And number six, what important truth did you discover? Meaning now that we've invested in this failure? How will we get a return on this investment like Maren Kate said, her five million dollar MBA? I love this quote from the sculptor Auguste Rodin. He said, "Nothing is a waste of time if you use the experience wisely."

Whether we see an experience as a failure or a success is a choice. It is always your choice. Paraphrasing John Milton, the mind is its own place and can make a very heaven, a hell, of every hell, a heaven. The mind is its own place and can make of every success, a failure, of every failure, a success. Even when you lose your job I have this hypothesis about losing jobs. In the United States, 10 to 15 percent of the workforce loses their job every year, which means that many people will lose their jobs at least once over the course of their career. If you've lost a job, you might be thinking, "Well, you lost it because of politics." Think about it. Politics just means are someone playing where you want to play and they're bigger than you are. And it's almost impossible to walk through the door of your market opportunity again, back to taking the right risks, when there's a bouncer standing at the door. So consider the possibility that you lost your job because it was time to go and you knew it. You knew it was time to jump to a new S curve, but you wouldn't do it, so the universe gave you a nudge.

Whether you see something as a failure or success as a choice, it is always your choice.

Listen to this short clip from Brian Moran, CEO of Small Business Edge.

Brian Moran: I was at Entrepreneur magazine and, you know, decent pay and, you know, mortgage, three kids and all that. And I had kind of a falling out with the president of the company and they eliminated my position. And I'm driving home and I call my mother and I said, "Hey, mom, you know, I got some bad news. I just got fired from my job." And she said, "Brian, what are you worried about?" "I'm worried about security. You know, I got kids, I got a

mortgage." And I said, you know, and in my head, I thought, "I'm never going to work again or I'm going to go, have to get a job at a McDonald's or something like that."

And she said to me, "The only security you will ever need in life is between your ears." And let me tell you, I have used that ever since. And it's amazing how it works out. Sometimes you need to take that step back before you have to go forward. Maybe a couple of steps back. I had a dozen offers in two weeks.

Whether we see an experience as a failure or a success is a choice.

It is always your choice.

When I was writing *Build an A-Team*, I had a conversation with Alan Mulally, who was the CEO who turned Ford around. He told the story of how during the executive meetings he would ask for the status of every new product. The status was color-coded. Green ahead of plan. Yellow for potential concerns. Red was off-plan. He promised that honesty would not be penalized. No one believed him because under the previous CEO, they had been. Every week, meeting after meeting, people would show up with green, even though Ford was losing billions of dollars. After about six weeks of kabuki theater, someone finally mustered the courage to say yellow. When they did, Alan applauded and he asked, "Who can help?" It was a defining moment when people knew they wouldn't get fired or even shame. They were willing to say what was actually happening.

I was so intrigued. I interviewed him for the book and I asked him, "Alan, how do you see, how do you think about failure?" And he said, "I don't." I said, "No, really. How do you see, how do you think about failure?" He said, "I don't." For him, success is simply everyone knows the plan, the status of the plan and what special attention you need to get back on plan. The problems, the challenges, they're gems. When we know this, we can work together to deliver on the plan. I'll admit, when I had that conversation with him four years ago, it didn't compute. It really didn't compute.

But it's starting to. Which is how moving up our S curve is supposed to be. Gradually, things that didn't compute, start to. When I interviewed Roger Martin for our podcast, he was the world's leading management thinker in 2017, an economist by training. He shared that for democratic capitalism to work, we need to think of our economy not as a perfectible machine, but as a complex adaptive system where we're finding the balance between efficiency and resilience.

I think this is true for us as individuals.

It's not about being perfect, it's about progress. Said Earl Nightingale, "Success is the progressive realization of a worthy goal."

In his book, *Outwitting the Devil*, a lesser known work by Napoleon Hill, the author of *Think and Grow Rich*, he said a number of interesting things about adversity and failure. Three statements in particular. Number one, every adversity brings with it the seed of an equivalent advantage. Number two, failure is a manmade circumstance. It's never real until it's accepted by us as permanent. And three, failure is a climax or what I would call, a pattern interrupt, in which one has the privilege of clearing the mind of fear and making a new start in a different direction.

When you are committed to becoming a high growth individual, it's a matter of when, not if, you will be disrupted by failure, by mistakes, by things that didn't work. But remember, we make mistakes all the time. So it's not the mistakes that are the problem. It's shame. It's perfectionism. All of which can lead to depression, anxiety, addiction and paralysis, generally. Where we're no longer willing to practice personal disruption and our climb of the S curve stops. To wrap up one final story. As some of you know, my husband is a scientist and he conducts experiments routinely. I never gave this much thought until recently. I had just finished a live group coaching session. I wasn't happy with it. I am doing a much better job of keeping that perfectionism gremlin at bay, better than I have in the past. But occasionally it gets out of the cage. When I talk to one of my coaches about what had happened, she said, "Well, just change your narrative." So I did. I decided that the next time I did a live group coaching session, I would tell everybody up front, "Some days it's going to be great and you're going to think I'm awesome at coaching. And

other days you'll think I'm terrible." When, I notice the word when, I mess up, let's analyze what went wrong because we're running an experiment. When I started describing the situation the scenario that way, a mental switch was flipped. When I'm experimenting, my ego, my identity and especially my value, they're taken out of the equation. The Gremlin sleeps and even if it stirs, it's so well restrained, there isn't space enough to even rear its head. Experiments are the way through, over and around perfectionism. Experiments are the way through, over and around failure. And I'm realizing that we can use this not just for special projects, but every day. Today, I'm running an experiment. I've got five things to do. I'll prepare, because scientists have protocols and scientists prepares. But then I'm just going to see what works. It's a slight change, but for me it's a seismic shift.

Instead of fearing the inevitable mistakes, I can look forward, you can look forward, we can look forward to what we're going to learn. As Sandy Stelling shared with us in our interview with her, when she was frustrated about not doing well in college, Professor Wei said to her, "Sandy, you're not here to get the answer right. You're here to learn how to learn."

Now it's your turn. Think about some of your biggest setbacks. How could you reframe them as a success?

What successes have been possible because of prior failures? Who in your life do you allow or not to make mistakes? If it's in your family, what's happening? Is it them? Is it you? And what would you like to do? If you want to be an agent of disruption, first become its subject. The up and the down are part of personal disruption, failure is a constraint, a tool of creation, the way over, around and through failure, the fastest way up your S curve is to experiment and whether you see an experiment is a failure or a success is a choice.

It is always your choice.

If you'd like to do more work on this, you can download our PDF that reviews the entire framework of personal disruption, including give failure it's due at whitneyjohnson.com/calm.

If you'd like a list of all the episodes we referenced, you can find those in the show notes at whitneyjohnson.com/podcast.

Thank you again for joining me. I'd love to hear what was useful for you about this episode at wj@whitneyjohnson.com.

And thank you to our team, Emily Cottrell, Dan Rutty and Melissa Rutty.

I'm Whitney Johnson and this is Disrupt Yourself.