

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 206: CHARLENE LI

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

I'm your host, Whitney Johnson.

Before I introduce our guest today, a quick reminder that if you enjoy this podcast, please leave a five star review on Apple iTunes, if you haven't already or share the episode, share the podcast with someone who is also, like you, serious about growth. Our podcast grows due to the algorithm and word of mouth. So, thank you for leaving reviews and sharing it with your colleagues and friends and your family

Our guest today is Charlene Li, New York times bestselling author and founder of the Altimeter group which was acquired by Profit in 2015.

The Altimeter Group is a company that disrupted the industry analyst world because she, Charlene Li, came up with a new business model. Her most recent book is *The Disruption Mindset: Why Some Organizations Transform and Others Fail*.

Whitney Johnson: Charlene, welcome to the podcast.

Charlene Li: Thank you so much for having me Whitney.

Whitney Johnson: I'd like to start by having you share with us so that we know who you are, one or two formative stories that really have made you who you are today. What are those stories?

Charlene Li: I grew up in Detroit. Which is not where you expect an Asian American woman to be coming from, like maybe the coast or something, maybe Vancouver, in Canada. I was born in Detroit and I grew up there, and then later on in the suburbs. And when I started school, I was the only person of color in my entire school.

It was that way for pretty much the entire time, until I went to another high school outside of my neighborhood. And it was very formative because right from the very beginning of my social life, I was an outsider. I was different and I stuck out like a sore thumb. So I got used to being different, all the time.

Even though I didn't feel different and I had great friends who accepted me for who I was, there was always this awareness that I wasn't like everybody else, and I grew comfortable with that. And I think that was very formative for

me later on in my life to be able to do things that were different from other people and feel very comfortable with it and secure with that. Again, not always feeling great about it, but knowing that being different was par for the course for my existence. And the other formative thing is that I went to a different high school, like my school all the way through middle school, it just wasn't challenging. And we would take these field trips to this place on the other side of Detroit called Cranbrook, that had a great art Institute and science center. And I heard rumors that they had a school there where A's were like C's and I thought that was the most glorious thing to be able to go to a school where I was going to be challenged. So it being very far away from my home, it'd be like an hour drive each way, they fortunately had a boarding school. In 10th grade, I decided to leave home, applied to the school, got in.

It was hard. They pushed me to the extent that no other education had and I went to Harvard college and I went to Harvard Business School. The best education was at that school. Because it really pushed me to the very limits of what I thought was capable. And that was so instructive, in terms of building my confidence about trying new things and exploring things in a very safe, a very inclusive environment.

Whitney Johnson: So Charlene, what was the hardest thing that you did in high school and who was the teacher that made all of that hardness possible?

Charlene Li: It was when I got there in 10th grade. I didn't know how to write. I just had never strung sentences together. My mastery of the language of grammar was terrible. And my English teacher in 10th grade, her name is Lolly Hazard, whipped me into shape. Just completely trashed my papers. Said, "No, this is not the right way to do it, this is the way to do it." And with every single paper I learned so much. Her comments were very direct. They were fair and in some cases they were harsh. I said, "What it is this?" But I credit her for teaching me how to write and that really hard process.

Whitney Johnson: Well, and it's interesting. I was thinking as I was preparing interview and reading your writing, your prose is just so clear. It's just clear. Everybody who's listening, if you want to see clear prose, read her book, *The Disruption Mindset*, look at her LinkedIn profile. It's just clear. And so you credit her with starting you on that journey to be a good writer.

Charlene Li: Absolutely. think teachers are so wonderful. They make such a huge impact on our lives, but Mrs. Hazzard in particular, taught me how to be humble about my writing, how to be inquisitive and curious. And really, she taught me about the artistry, about the song of the language, about how it could be used to express your deepest feelings and thoughts.

And it was opening a door that I'd never seen before, to be able to have that process of writing and of thinking and then of writing some more and then thinking some more. So I didn't think of writing just as stringing the words together, but it was a way to actually bring out your deepest thoughts of what you thought about something. And that is the writing process, the thinking process, the critical thinking process that she really taught me.

Whitney Johnson: You mentioned with your first story of growing up in Detroit and being the only person of color, that helped you be comfortable with being different, which is what a disruptor does and that's what we're going to talk about today. Can you think of an experience in your professional life where you needed to be different?

Charlene Li: In my first job out of college, I was working for a consulting firm called Monitor Group, and I worked for one year in Boston and then took an assignment to go work in Amsterdam, a brand new office there. I had never been to Amsterdam. I'd been to Europe, no traveling around, but never worked there and I really wanted to work overseas. So I end up there, we're short-staffed, and my partner said, "Hey, you can take this case. You can run with it. You can be the KC leader because we have no one else, so you're going to have to do this." I'm 23 years old. It completely out of my element. In a foreign country as an American ex-pat and the client goes, "You know, it will be really good to do a free cash flow on the strategy of proposing."

I'm like, "Sure,, that's great." Run back to the office and go, "What is a free cash flow that I just committed ourselves to doing?" So learn how to do that overnight. Got there... and we didn't have internet back then so it was really, it was like pulling my hair out, trying to figure out how to do this, but went back the next day figured out how to do that.

And it was just two years of learning, literally on my feet. What was business? What was strategy? How to work with clients? So being thrown in the deep end, like that was again, another huge formative experience professionally, but that prepared me for taking on lots of different adventures, which I think we're going to get into later on.

Whitney Johnson: Yes, we are. So did you feel a sense of differentness of just being in a foreign country? Like how did that show up for you? So clearly you were being thrown onto the bottom of a brand new S-curve of learning, right? Like here you go, "Charlene, yeah, build a free cashflow model overnight and you have no idea what it is." Was the differentness in that you were in Amsterdam? How did that show up for you?

Charlene Li: It was, again, that hyper-growth of learning. I actually committed myself to learning Dutch. So if I was... And it's really hard because the Dutch are really good at speaking English. Their English was far superior even to my English anyway, because they studied it. I did that. I got a bike.

I really try to live locally. And just, and so there was learning on that personal level for me, new friends with complete and total strangers and then doing all this work professionally as well. And then on top of that, just culturally, there was nobody else who looked like me. When I decided to go into business, my family thought I was crazy.

I come from a family of engineers and doctors and they said, "Why would you go into business? Everyone there is tall white males. You're a short Asian woman. So why would you do this to yourself?" And I realized I really loved leading people. I loved the organizations of businesses and fascinated by how they actually get work done and the potential for them to have huge impact.

It was really hard being Asian, American, young female. In a foreign country, it was one big advantage. They didn't know what to do with me. They had never encountered anyone that came remotely close to the things that I were saying.

So as a consultant, say, [inaudible], "We need to look at things very differently." I actually had permission because I was so different. They're like, "Let's hear her out. Let's see what she's got to say, because this is this going to be interesting."

Whitney Johnson: There's a freedom that comes with it, because you know that there's not some norm that they expect you to conform to because they don't even know what the norm is. I love that. And because growing up, you were constantly translating and moving between these different worlds, there was a fluency and an ability to be able to do that. Hence the, "I'm going to learn Dutch and I'm going to ride a bike and I'm going to have this experience."

Charlene Li: Right.

Whitney Johnson: I would love to hear about Altimeter group. How do you pronounce that? Is that right?

Charlene Li: That sounds good. Altimeter. Some people say Altimeter. It's right both ways.

Whitney Johnson: Okay, Altimeter. So I would love to have you tell us a story because you, in, in 2008, you start this business that you sold in 2015.

I would love for all of our listeners to hear how it disrupted the research market at the time, what the business model was, and just tell us a little bit about that business that you created.

Charlene Li: Sure. I was at Forrester Research for almost 10 years as an analyst and was really happy there. They supported me writing my first book called *Groundswell*, published in 2008. And I realized after I published it, finish it and did everything, the launch, the idea of going back to just "being an analyst," wasn't very appealing. And I totally respected the strategy that Forrester had, I just didn't fit into the organization anymore. I wanted to do much more holistic research and work and ask questions that just didn't fit with what the organization was trying to do. So, made the really hard decision to leave. And I couldn't figure out what I wanted to do next. I couldn't find an organization.

I talked to lots of partners about starting new businesses or joining organizations and none of them felt right. So I said, "I'm just going to hang up my shingle for a year." Worked with a naming agency to come up with the name Altimeter, landed three clients, and then the recession hit. And I'm sitting going, "I was starting a business in the middle of the recession."

Except that there was one major difference about my business. I was writing and consulting around social media. And it was the hottest newest thing because everybody's marketing and sales and service budgets got cut. So, what's the social media thing over here? Could we use that? Cause it looks free and interesting and it's really different to be able to continue with business.

So I added some partners and we grew gangbusters in 2009, 2010, just like, just exploded because we're the only game in town. And the business model was very different because all the other research firms big, huge, Gartner at that point was \$2 billion. Forrester was \$3 million. IDC was like five or \$600 million.

We were four people. How do you compete against that? And they all charged subscription revenues to get access to their research. And a lot of it came from tech vendors who wanted to influence the analysts. And about half of it came from brands. We said, "You can't buy us. We don't charge your subscriptions. If you want our research, here you go." We gave it away for free. A business model of free is pretty hard to beat. So we would get 100,000 people reading each of our reports versus maybe four or 5,000 for a really good report at Forrester. So our scale and our brand was just exponential. And we were able to literally build a brand overnight on the backs of social media, which is what we were consulting about.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, I love that. And so the business model was you gave away the research for free, but then people would hire you to consult their businesses on implementing social media, or what did that look like?

Charlene Li: Exactly. We would do a design thinking process saying, "What were the key targets that we had? What were the key problems that they had?" And we wrote the research to address those specific problems that we knew were deep. They were not something that you could resolve on your own, and that could also lead to repeatable deliverables.

And most consulting firms really pride themselves on this like bespoke model of consulting. Like, "We're going to develop a strategy just for you that's unique." We were doing it just the other way. "Here's an assessment. We can run the same assessment over and over again." Because when companies are at the beginning of that S curve of disruption, they don't even know what's going on.

They need an assessment of themselves, of the landscape, what the capabilities are cause they don't even know where to start. And so we do that workshops and speeches, all highly targeted, again, to those pain points that we put into the reports and they could address. We needed, I think, 0.5% of our readers to convert, to be able to make it worthwhile.

And our scarcity, our limited resource was analyst's time. So we needed to spend as little time as possible marketing and selling and all of our time writing research and delivering revenues. So we maximized and use all of the capabilities of our marketing and influence to just make people call us and say, "Have you been sitting on my shoulder in my boardroom? How are you in my head? You need to come over now." And so our sales process wasn't sales. It was a scoping and time and booking it on the calendar.

Whitney Johnson: Do you remember how you had the idea for this business model? Did the idea spring magically from your head or was it a little bit more of that sort of, "Let's try this. Let's try that. Let's try this."

Charlene Li: I had the idea of doing something differently than the other models, partly because I didn't like the whole subscription business and knowing that it was married to influence. I wanted to be an analyst that you could not buy. You could not buy us.

I just said, "I'm going to go over here, who nobody is." And I also knew that the existing incumbents could never follow me. They could not follow into a free business model. So who's going to compete against us? They can't.

Whitney Johnson: Disruption at its finest.

In your book you write, "Disruption doesn't create. Growth creates disruption."

Charlene Li: Yes. With my business model for Altimeter, if we actually hadn't grown, it would have been a nice little footnote. It would have been an interesting idea for a disruption. It really became a disruption when we would be listed as one of the top analyst firms, along with all the other existing players. It was because of our growth actually delivering on that. And frankly, for ourselves, it was one thing to talk about the disruption, but when we actually had to grow, it was incredibly difficult to scale from four people to 10 people, to 20 people. And it was just hard to add all those layers and to continue to grow and sustain that momentum. I think it's the, one of the biggest reasons why people don't actually grow, is they get to that very edge and they look over the edge and like, "Wait, if we grow, it means we want to change everything that we do. That's really scary. Let's step back away from that."

Whitney Johnson: So, that's a nice segue into what I wanted to ask you next, which is you sold Altimeter group in 2015, and so here you are, you're at the top of this S curve and you do this scary thing, and some would call it not scary, but you made the decision to sell. I think that is scary. And so, my question for you is what have you done since then to keep climbing, to keep moving to new S curves?

Charlene Li: I think about my career in 18-month chunks. I look out 18 months from now and say, "Where do I want to be? What skills, what is a, we're going to look like, my day to day? And how am I going to make sure that I grow into that? Cause I don't want to be at the same place where I am."

And I didn't go out looking to sell the company. I was looking to finance it, but you always, as a founder and in business, you always have in your back pocket, a piece of paper that says, "If somebody would come and make an offer, what are the criteria?" And I had two. The first one is it had to be a culture fit.

And the second one, it had to be a strategic fit, but the culture fit comes first. Because strategies will change and it's a culture that's going to carry you through those tough discussions. And that has been true with Profit.

Every time there was like a situation that's not to my liking. I'm like, "Wait a minute. This isn't the way I expected. Let's talk about this." And to Profit's credit, they always come to the table, always, listen, we always hack it out. We have these tough conversations, and we keep going. Which is why five and half years later, I'm still there.

I don't run Altimeter anymore. I've handed off those reins. Very happy to do that. But now I'm writing more books, I'm speaking, I'm sitting on boards, I'm creating mastermind groups, I'm creating virtual courses. I'm doing all these other things on top of being an analyst that keep me engaged and growing.

Whitney Johnson: I love what you said you think in 18 month increments of just, "Where do I want to be and 18 months and how do I grow into that?" That's interesting. And what I like about that too, is it's not five years. Cause sometimes it's hard to think so far ahead, but 18 months, we can do, we can say right now it's early 2021. We can say, "Okay. June of 2022, where do I want to be?"

Charlene Li: And it's. So, in keeping with your S-curve right in the first six months, you're just trying to figure out where the bathroom is, honestly, in any new jobs. Like, "Where am I, what am I supposed to be doing?" The next six months after that, you're really starting to master it, and then for six months you get to revel in that mastery, but you better be looking for your next challenge. Because at some you are gonna get bored.

Whitney Johnson: Absolutely. So, in your book, Charlene, you talk about four types of disruptive leaders. Tell us more.

Charlene Li: Sure. When we talk about disruptive leadership, what I was really trying to tease apart, what makes a disruptive leader? What are the characteristics of them? And I went out and surveyed a thousand leaders from all around the globe and came down to two key factors.

The first one is an openness to change mindset.

And the second one was leadership behaviors that inspire and empower the followers. And when you do this by two by two, it came up with four different archetypes. The person who is high in both openness to change and these leadership behaviors is what I call a realist optimist. They see the future and they also know how to get there. They can do the block and tackle and do the pragmatic moves to get to that future. There was about 27% of leaders who fit into that group. And there's another group called the steadfast managers. They're really good leaders. They just practice leadership. They get things done. They inspire people, but they're not really comfortable with a lot of change.

They're your classic manager. They see the proportion and chaos and they try to get rid of it and put in place a great process to make sure everything runs smoothly. And that's the vast majority of leaders. These are steadfast managers, about 50%. There's another group that's called the agent provocateur.

They love change, but they're not very good at getting it done. And those were about 3%. And then my favorite group actually are the worried skeptics. They are not open to change. They like the status quo, and the leadership tends to be closer in. They're not as comfortable being out there and leading from the front and leading people. The reason why I like worried skeptics is they can just see all the reasons and come up with all the reasons why a new idea is not going to work. And they're 19% of the group. And. Every organization, no matter how advanced, has every single one of these archetypes.

Understanding all the different archetypes that you have in an organization is absolutely key, because if you're the realist optimist, you can only move as fast as your slowest worried skeptic. So, you have to bring them along.

Whitney Johnson: So, Charlene, have you done any research around pairing. So, for example, a more successful organization is going to have not only the realist, optimist and worried skeptics. Have you found that there's any sort of optimal combination?

Charlene Li: Yes. The most frequent one is pairing the agent provocateur with the steadfast managers, because they really play to each other's strengths and it's understanding who these people are and then connecting them. Again, there are very few agent provocateurs and they do one of two things. They either just blow things up so much they get rejected by the organization or you pair them and develop really strong relationships with these steadfast managers and develop trust between them so that they help each other along, because they completely play again to what the other person is not strong at and can complement each other.

Whitney Johnson: What's interesting about that though. If you say that, agent provocateurs are only 3%, then it sounds like the ratio is you only need one agent provocateur for every 20 steadfast managers, for example, you don't need a lot. It's like the leaven in the lump.

Charlene Li: Exactly. They can get around pretty quickly and it's about providing the discipline and the process. The one really amazing thing I found out about the counterintuitive finding from my research was that these disruptive organizations we think about, they're extremely well-run.

They have a lot of organization and process and that nasty word that people think is terrible, governance. there's a lot of governance. I am a huge fan of governance of structure, process policies, but good governance, good process, good organization that focuses you on getting to the disruption rather than stopping it.

Whitney Johnson: Okay, so I want to go back for just a minute to, finish out the loop around the four types of disruptive leaders. Is there any kind of, gender difference that you found?

Charlene Li: Yes. Unfortunately, I found a disruption, gender gap in every single one of these archetypes. Men rated themselves on a scale of one to 10, more disruptive than their female counterparts. So, let's just look at the realist optimist. On the scale of one to 10, the men weighted themselves as 7.4 women, 6.7. So, a significant drop in terms of the way that they saw themselves as being disruptive. And those scores for openness to change mindsets and leadership behaviors were exactly the same. And yet women saw themselves as less capable, less confident about their ability to drive disruption. And this is a problem, because when half of your populations is discounting themselves, not putting themselves out there, they don't see that they are as capable of driving disruption, then it's

incumbent upon the other leaders in the organization to come to them, develop them and say, “No, you are capable of doing this.” To help them find that confidence to do that. And there's a lot of research that shows that it's not that women don't think they're comfortable, that they don't think they're capable of doing this, but when they see the rules that are written, women tend to follow the rules, which is men are given much more permission to say, “I could break those rules.” And it makes sense because if you're a woman and that you heard my description before, if you're the only woman in the room, if you're the only person of color in the room, if you're the only person without a perception that you don't have the right education, or you don't come from the right background, whatever only you perceive yourself as being, you're using all of your energy, just to be in that room.

And so, the ability to be in that room and to raise your hand and stick out and throw a bomb in the middle of it, is really hard unless you feel completely included. So, I love the diversity inclusion and especially the sense of belonging. It is so important for this major reason. If you want to tap into the disruptive power of every single one of your employees, belonging has to be a top priority.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. And you know, what's so interesting about that. Charlene is this idea of where we started the conversation, of you had this experience of being different? And part of that experience was being a female. There were obviously several other contributing factors. And so, if you get people in a room and this idea of like it's taking every ounce of energy, they have to even have a seat at the table.

And yet their life experience, underrepresented groups, whoever they are, have that ability to think differently because of their experience. And so, they could do it, it's just a matter of activating them so that it does happen.

Charlene Li: And I think especially after the summer, there's a greater awareness now of what that actually means. It's not just a numbers issue. It's not just bringing somebody into the room or into the organization. How will you accept that person's difference? How will you see it as a strength? It's not about culture fit. It's about culture add. And when you think of it that way, and you accept and welcome the change that somebody who's different is going to bring welcome the disruption that they will represent and inevitably have just by being in the room. Then you're opening yourself up to have a great culture, to be able to deal with all these differences.

Whitney Johnson: It's so interesting on your website, you made this comment that you like to be afraid. Tell us more about that experience. What do you love about being afraid?

Charlene Li: I think about it as going out to the edge. I drink my coffee in the morning out of a mug that says, “Life begins at the end of your comfort zone.” So, I challenge myself every day to push myself out of my comfort zone, because that's where I learned that is where I grow, being at that growth edge. I love jumping off of high places because of that unsettling feeling that I get. It's just thrilling. It's a huge hit to my brain, to my system. And so, I get those little hits every day. I remember, I was at South by Southwest waiting to go into a meeting and the person who was checking them in is like a temp worker.

She had on her arm, a tattoo that said, “Adventure.” And so, I turned to her, I'm like, “Tell me about that tat.” And she said, “I've been traveling the world for the past two years. And I finally came back home to Austin and I realized I never wanted to lose that spirit of adventure, so I got this tat. So, I looked down at and everyday realized that I can have an adventure just where I am with the people, I'm with that in itself can be an adventure.”

Whitney Johnson: So, customers. In your book, you talk about focusing growth on the fastest moving part of your ecosystem, which are customers. What are one or two ways to do that?

Charlene Li: One of the top ways to do this is to be completely focused on the future customer, not just your customers of today. And the reason being is that they will keep you honest. They will help you, lead you to where you want to go. And it's interesting. I go into organizations and in my consulting, I asked them for permission to walk around the company for an hour beforehand and just ask people three questions.

And the questions are, “Who is your future customer?” They're looking at me, like with my eyes, like cross, and are like, “Who are you? What are you asking about?” “Who is your customer, then?” “What's your strategy of the company to be able to serve that future customer?” And the third question is, “How does your personal dashboard

show you that you're contributing to the success, to the execution of that strategy?" But it always starts with that future customer because so many organizations are pinned on today.

They focus on only serving the customer today. And when by the time you've actually figured out how to do that. They have moved on. The disruptive organizations and this are their one key secret is they focus on the future. They will execute on things really well today. But all of their effort is to try to discern who that future customer is. And it's extremely hard. It's not clear. It's not certain you're making bets when you don't know what the outcomes are. And in most organizations, you don't get rewarded for being wrong. You get rewarded for being right, a hundred percent of the time. So, if that's true, why would you ever make a bet on the future that you can't see and predict with a hundred percent certitude?

So, one of the things I really encourage people to do is to create empathy maps. If you have an inkling of who this person is for the future, go beyond a persona, really talk about how do they feel? How do they think? What do they say and what do they do? And really get down into those pain points, those joy points, the stories that you can tell about the person. Have them come alive, because what you want your organization to do just to fall in love with this future customer. Because when you fall in love with them and want to serve them, you will do everything possible to get as close to them as you can.

Whitney Johnson: You have me thinking. You've touched on this briefly, but I want to talk a little bit more about it. This idea of process drives culture. Do you have any recommendations for people who are listening on how to put in place an organizational structure that can make this disruption possible?

Charlene Li: Sure. Again, I think culture is all about your beliefs and your behaviors. If you want to change your culture, then you change your beliefs and behaviors, and process is a great way to do that. If everything is focused on your future customer, then what are the processes that are getting in the way of you seeing who that customer is?

What are the processes you need to put in place? And I'll give an example of Comcast. Again, one of the things that they have been trying to do, they don't have the best reputation for great customer service, as you may know. But they looked at the three, I think, beliefs of a disruptive organization: openness, agency, and a bias for action. And they went into their call centers and created huddles. And the huddles, were these regular meetings. Once a week, twice a week, sometimes three times a week, of teams where they get together and share, "What are the biggest problems?" And they will write a memo and send that up through the entire working session.

Sometimes it's in product development. Sometimes it's a marketing and these all get escalated up to Brian Roberts, the CEO, and he reads three of every single week. And everybody else has the quota too as well. And they are tasked with responding back to that team. That sense of agency that creates at the front lines, but it's a process to really elevate that voice of the customer up and throughout the organizations from the front lines, the people who really hear that. But you were always lost, because there wasn't a process to be able to do this. Now imagine the culture change that happens that if you're on that team, the person who came up with that idea and the CEO just responded back to you.

What does that say? It says so much, and it changes the culture literally overnight when you have those kinds of connections, but that's a process that really has to be engineered to these new beliefs and to focus on that future customer.

Whitney Johnson: I started to say organizational structure, but really, we're talking about process and you're saying, "Okay, if you have a belief that you want, or values by which you want your culture to operate, it starts with behaviors and process around that behaviors because they're very observable, they're very concrete, they're very measurable." And you do those simple things. That process starts to lead to the culture that you want.

Charlene Li: Again, beliefs and behaviors are interconnected, right? And you could change a belief. It could change the way you think, but if it doesn't get reflected in the behavior is nothing's changed. And if you just change the behaviors, but we have some of these reluctant, worried skeptics again, who like, "I don't want to do that."

Just do it. But over time, they began to change their beliefs too. So, it's really simple. I think sometimes we overthink this morass of culture. How do we change it? So many people just throw up their hands and go, "I can't change." Culture can change it. I hear CEOs tell me this all the time, "Oh my culture. It's a mess." I'm like, "You're the CEO. Go change it!"

Whitney Johnson: As we start to wrap up you also talk on your website about cats. Tell us about cats.

Charlene Li: My cat, my boy, Cosmo. He is a big boy. He's 15 pounds of lean muscle, and he's very motivated by treats. And I have been teaching him tricks. I secretly want a dog, but I don't have a lifestyle to have a dog. So, I looked at my cat and I'm like, I'm going to teach you how to sit and give me five and he can lay down, turn circles, jump through hoop, sit up, meow on command. So, the way I think about this is when you think about disruption, I think about it as teaching a cat tricks, we say, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." That's not what disruption is about. Disruption is actually teaching cat tricks because you never thought a cat could actually do tricks.

They can, they absolutely can. You just have to know how to think like a cat? And so, I think to be an effective disruptor, you have to be thinking about "how do I teach a cat tricks?" This is something that people have never done before, and this is not something we do every day, but we're going to have to get really good at this. Because as we have seen over this past year, we are just surrounded by disruption. We can never assume that life is just going to continue as it is. And for us to really do well by our various stakeholders, our shareholders, our employees, our communities, our customers. We are shirking that responsibility if we don't think about disruption, if we don't proactively think about how to prepare and how to thrive with it, rather than just survive it.

Whitney Johnson: So, Charlene, you said at the beginning that you're doing all sorts of fun things. Where can people find you if they want to engage with you?

Charlene Li: They can find me at my website, charleneli.com. And also, on LinkedIn, Twitter, all the various social media handles, pretty much everywhere with my name.

Whitney Johnson: Is there one though that you're especially excited about right now, one platform that you're like, "Come see me here."

Charlene Li: It would probably be LinkedIn. It's just the place where there's some greatest engagement. There's a lot of people there. I live stream there. It's a pretty awesome platform.

Whitney Johnson: What days and times do you live stream?

Charlene Li: I have been moving them around. I'm actually testing it right now. But yeah, so I, I wasn't happy with Tuesdays at nine or 10 o'clock in the morning or Thursdays because everybody podcasts and live streams then. And so, I'm moving it around, trying to test it again. Part of my exercise. And changing things up because I got into a routine. It wasn't fresh anymore. I've taken a few weeks off and I'm getting back into it. And I'm intentionally testing a lot of different times with different topics with guests and not just to see what's out there.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. So, people can find you, like you said, pretty much everywhere. One place right now that you're excited about is LinkedIn live.

So, the penultimate question for you is what was most useful for you today in this conversation, as you were thinking and processing?

Charlene Li: It's really thinking about staying on the S curve at that hyper-growth stage. How do you stay at that stage? I know the idea of S curves and disruption is always a layer another one over again, over and over again. So, it was like the 18 month and having them overlap. The question I've always been toying with and I've been doing some research into this is how do you maintain your energy? How do you not get fatigued by that? And what this conversation is reminding me is how important it is to have a sense of purpose, to continue that energy. And it reminds me of when the pandemic hit. I like so many other people just went into shock for about two weeks. I was just in grief. I realized I was mourning the way that the world was going to be and how everything had changed and

the loss that we were all going to suffer in many cases. So deep, personal loss of our loved ones. And that pain was a sitting with me. And after about two weeks, I remembered what my purpose was.

And I wake up now every morning to my strong sense of purpose that today, “This is how I’m going to serve the world.” And so, helping leaders thrive with disruption is my purpose and it gets me excited and it gives me that energy to stay at that hyper growth stage and to look for the next stage. As I see a plateauing, what’s my next curve going to be?

So, I keep going back to my purpose. I go back to my persona, my target person, her name is Renee. She’s a woman of color who is trying to rise and do things. She’s the reason why I get up in the morning.

Whitney Johnson: Which reminds me of what you said earlier, are you falling in love with your customer enough?

Charlene Li: I am so in love with my target persona. My, my empathy map for her is on my desk. I have a picture of her, and I feel like I talked to her every time I am writing, when I am doing video, when I’m doing a podcast, I am talking to her because I’m so in love with her, and I want to serve her.

Whitney Johnson: Any final thoughts, Charlene?

Charlene Li: Disruption, isn’t something I set up my career to do. Was it something like, “Oh yeah, I’m going to graduate, become a disruptor.” And I didn’t even realize I was even a disruptor. I just felt like I was doing good work. And I think in the end, that’s what all of us just want to do, is to have an impact and know that we made an impact in this world.

And just by knowing you want to create an impact means by that definition, you are changing the status quo. You are a disruptor. You don’t need to be doing big D disruption, things, blowing things up all the time. It’s just saying, “How can I make the world better? How can I make a person’s life, this moment better?”

By changing the status quo just by that small little act that, that small little thought and you are being a disruptor.

Whitney Johnson: Charlene Li. Thank you for helping us all disrupt a little bit more.

Charlene Li: Okay. Thank you again so much for having me. It’s been great talking to you.

There are so many great nuggets here. I’m just going to choose five.

First, I love how Charlene Li disrupted the industry analyst industry by giving away the research, something that her competitors couldn’t give away. She made me think of another innovative entrepreneur, Gabrielle Blair. She’s known as “design mom,” the founder of Alt Summit. It’s episode 149. And you know those giveaways that people do on blogs? Well, she started that about 15 years ago.

Second. Do scary things to build the muscle of doing scary things. This reminded me of Karen Walrond. You probably haven’t listened to this episode. It’s episode 27. She’s originally from Trinidad. She decided to build that muscle of doing scary things by going scuba diving, because she’d never done it before. My scary isn’t so much scuba diving. It’s more in the vicinity of just going on a vacation and the first place, if you remember, we had that download of jumping to a vacation S curve which you can go to whitneyjohnson.com/download. So do scary things to build the muscle of doing scary things, but everybody’s scary is a different kind of scary.

Third. Transparency builds trust because it builds accountability with all the parties involved. I’d never really thought of it like this, but when I talk out what I’m doing with you and I include you in the process, and when you talk about what you’re doing with me and you include me in the process, there’s this accountability that starts to get built in and embedded in that interaction. I also thought it was interesting, just that reminder of the value of disagreeing

with people. That made me go back to episode 174 with Buster Benson. He wrote a book called *Why Are We Yelling?* It's a good question. Why are we yelling at each other? Especially when disagreement can be so productive because it helps us figure out what we actually think.

Fourth. Disruption doesn't create growth. Growth creates disruption. I actually agree with her and I disagree with her. When you grow, you're disrupting. But I also believe that when you choose to disrupt yourself, you are growing. If you want to go back and listen to the episode on this, it's episode 196 on why we disrupt ourselves, five reasons why, then you can decide if you agree or disagree or both.

Fifth. I love her idea of a customer advisory board, not the people who are your customers today, but who you want them to be in the future. By the way, if you haven't already, go back and listen to Martin Lindstrom, it's episode 199. He's a master in understanding the customer. In the meantime, Charlene's idea to understand that future customer and then ask yourself, "What are you doing to measure if you're delighting your future customer?" That for me is the biggest takeaway of the episode.

Thank you again to Charlene Li for being our guest. Thank you to you for your reviews. Thank you for the emails that I receive from you wj@whitneyjohnson.com and thank you, of course, for sharing the podcast.

Finally, thank you to our team, Emily Cottrell, Whitney Jobe, Steve Ludwig, Melissa Rutty, and Nancy Wilson.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.