

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 249: DAN ROAM

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on 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. Tell me if you can relate. Sometimes the hardest part of business isn't doing the actual work, it's communicating and convincing others, and yourself to get on board with a big risk, a big-time commitment, or a big investment. We default to PowerPoints and spreadsheets, facts, numbers, and data that will surely make the case to a boss or a client. But author, illustrator, and consultant Dan Roam will tell you that's probably a lost cause. That's because humans are emotional and visual. Not only do we love a great story, we need one to get on board with a plan or a cause. Dan's new book, *The Pop-up Pitch*, combines the study of successful communicators with modern neuroscience. The result tells us what we knew in our hearts all along. People like Star Wars and Marvel movies more than they like spreadsheets, and Dan has some remarkably simple tools that allow you to plug your business pitch or any big idea into the story of a hero's journey filled with twists, turns, lost hope, despair, and finally, a triumph that will convince anyone to join your team. I had so much fun talking with Dan, and I know you'll enjoy this conversation. So, Dan, what I'd like to do to start is have you share with our listeners a formative moment in your life.

Dan Roam: Thank you, Whitney. So I'm going to tell you a story that took place about 20 years ago. Talk about a formative moment. There was a lot going on. I was working in New York. I had just made a career shift from graphic design to management consultant, and there's a lot there already that we can talk about. Suffice it to say, one of my colleagues in the New York office had been working for months on a project with Tony Blair's new education policy team in the UK. And I didn't know anything about this project, but what I did know is that my colleague said at the last moment, Dan, I, said my colleague, am supposed to fly to London to give a presentation to Tony Blair's education group. I can't, though, because my wife is about to give birth. So Dan, can you go in my stead? And I said, Of course, I'll take the overnight flight. I'll fly from New York to London. That'll be awesome. But just go ahead and give me your PowerPoint material, so I'll have something to present when I get there. And he said, I don't have time. I'll get it to you later. It'll be there when you arrive in London, what have you? So I flew to London. I met our

British colleagues in London the night before we were supposed to go off to Sheffield University and do this giant daylong presentation, and there was no PowerPoint in my inbox. I had absolutely no idea what we were going to be talking about or what I was supposed to have prepared. And needless to say, Whitney, as you can imagine, arriving in London, my British-based colleagues took me out for dinner, so I'm already jetlagged. We had a giant dinner which involved probably more eating and drinking than I would normally have done. And I got up the next morning, completely hungover and feeling awful, got on the train to go to Sheffield with my colleagues and they said to me, OK, Dan, so show us the presentation. What are you going to talk about today with Tony Blair's people? And I was like, What? It was the worst Whitney.

Dan Roam: It was the worst experience of my life. I felt physically miserable. I had no idea what I'd stepped into and I was completely unprepared. But here is the beauty of English breakfast. On the first-class British Rail train riding up from London to Sheffield was about a two-hour train ride. We sat in first class and at a beautiful table set with white linen and silver. We ordered what felt like a four-course breakfast and during the course of that breakfast I started to feel better. The food was all starch and protein and a lot of coffee. But more importantly, what we did is, I pulled out my notebook and I said, Folks, can you tell me a little bit about the context of who we're presenting to and what we need to talk about? And they gave me at a high level, a beautiful conversation. So I started drawing out something that I'd been working on back in the office in New York, a kind of a simple drawing. Imagine a triangle with, you know, three points on the end, and each of those points represents one of the fundamental parts of having a really effective online strategy. And one is, who is your audience and what do you want them to know? And another point would be, what is the technology and what can you actually deliver? And another one would be, what is it that you bring in terms of your brand or your thoughts? And we combine these three And on, literally Whitney, on the back of a napkin.

Dan Roam: Over the next 30 minutes, we drew out our entire presentation no PowerPoint, nothing digital. And then when we got to Sheffield University, I went to the chalkboard. It was giant beautiful, sort of. I don't know what you call, amphitheater-style seating at Sheffield University with giant chalkboards. I went up to the chalkboard and I drew in the five minutes prior to our presentation, the same picture that we'd drawn on that napkin that talked about the three elements of a really effective online strategy and our audience segmentation and things like that, all of which we talked about on the train by drawing. And we had one of the best meetings I've ever had. Because what we did is I presented for maybe 10 minutes, the drawing on the chalkboard and the conversation that took place was real. It's a word that is so overused. But boy, is it true. It was authentic. There was nothing made up or fake, and all of it came together because of this simple, visual story that we created on the back of a napkin on the train. And I have never looked back that set the course of the next twenty years in my career and brought us to where you and I are talking now.

Whitney Johnson: Mic drop.

Dan Roam: It was awful, Whitney. That morning on the train was awful, but by the end of the day, life affirming. Here's what you can do if you just think and tell a visual story.

Whitney Johnson: For our listeners who are familiar with the framework of personal disruption, we talk a lot about constraints. I want you all to notice how Dan had a massive, towering, crushing constraint and how he turned it into a tool of creation. And like you said, you've never looked back. Have you ever wondered to yourself what would have happened if you hadn't had that moment? So, you had been you were a graphic designer, you were consulting? What was it going to take or what would it have taken for you to get to that point where you realized, oh, this is what I need to be doing?

Dan Roam: Yeah, Whitney. What a fantastic question. I think about it all the time, as I'm sure you do. I'm sure your listeners do, is as we look at our lives as they are now, however successful, or crazy or chaotic as they might be, and do look back and think, you know, how did I get here? What were those moments along the way that really were so important where I did Disrupt myself? And I think about it all the time and had that crazy trip to London not taken place. I imagine, Whitney that I would have ended up in the same place because my passion my entire life has been what we're going to call visual storytelling. And if I can break that just for a moment into two, the two words that it is. One is visual and the other one is storytelling. And it's in the sort of the Venn diagram, if you'd imagine two circles, one being visual, the idea of pictures, and the second circle being the idea of telling a story. And if you were to

overlap them, that point in the center where the story that you're telling is one that is clarified and amplified by very simple drawings or visuals that resonate in your mind and that of your audience, as you can see behind me, Whitney, your audience can't see it because we're just on audio, but I'm calling you from my painting studio, which is also my work desk.

Dan Roam: I have always painted all my life, and what I've always believed is that the act of creating a picture on a canvas, whether it's of a still life or whether it's of a person in a landscape. The idea of telling a story with a picture was something I was going to do in my career from the time I was tiny. And so, to answer your question, had the London trip not taken place, I believe I still would have ended up in the place where I've managed to make a career out of helping other people clarify their own thinking and then tell the best story of their life by amplifying the power of the visual mind and then using those images as the basis for the story that you want to tell. So, does that make sense, Whitney?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, it absolutely does. So, I want to come back to this idea of visual in a second, but before we do that, I want to. I want to talk a little bit more about you. Which is, so what has been your biggest moment of personal disruption and when you have disrupted yourself?

Dan Roam: Well, it would have been one day when I was sitting in the management consulting office of the company here in San Francisco. I joined this particular company, and it was once a really high-flying, digital agency in New York. We're talking several years ago. And I loved working in the New York office and then decided to move to San Francisco for family reasons, which was fine. And I had lived in San Francisco prior, so I knew what I was getting into. But Whitney, what I'd failed to realize is that in the 10 years I'd been out of San Francisco and living in New York on the East Coast, I had developed a very different sort of approach to career work. I had adopted very much the New York mindset where it's very go, go, go. Return calls immediately. It's quite aggressive, but you get a lot of stuff done. It's very focused on being super professional and being super responsive and making sure that everything is accounted for and you're going and you're going, and you get these damn tourists out of my way because I've got to get to the office and that type of thing. And then I came to San Francisco, and I had forgotten about the kind of the chill vibe where no, no, hey, dude, it's all cool. It's all great. You know, you're coming at me too aggressively. You're getting into my space. And I realized that I was really struggling at work and the office. Although I'd love to work there in New York when I came to the same company, its San Francisco office. It had a tone and a demeanor that was way out of line with where I was used to working, and I realized I have a choice here. I could either change everybody in the San Francisco office to be more like me, or I could try to change myself to be more like the office that I'd arrived in.

Dan Roam: And I had a really hard time doing that and I came out of a meeting. And here's the disruptive moment, Whitney, where I realized it's not going to work for me. And it wasn't the San Francisco vibe, but I realized, as it was in particular, this particular company at that particular time just wasn't going to happen for me. And I remember going into a meeting and coming out of that meeting, just so livid and so upset with how I wasn't understanding the people around me. I said, I have to quit. I have to go off and do the thing that I've been thinking about for years, ever since that London trip, in fact, which is, I've got to put a book together about the thing that I know that is my passion. The disruptive moment was taking the plunge to say, I've just arrived in San Francisco. I have a young family and I have a mortgage. But I cannot keep doing this job anymore. But happily, I know what I've always wanted to do is work on my book. So, I called my wife at that time, and I said to her if I were to walk away from my job right now, what? What would that mean? And we had enough money in the bank to go for a little while. And she said, and I said, I'm going to do it. So, I quit the job and went off to write the back of the napkin, and that was the critical turn in my career to go from working for someone else. To doing the thing I needed and wanted to do in working for myself.

Whitney Johnson: How many years was it between the Sheffield debacle turned glorious success and your decision to Disrupt Yourself?

Dan Roam: I'm guessing it was probably about five years.

Whitney Johnson: Five years, ok. And when you said that to your wife, what was her response? Was it, oh dear, or was it? It's about time or somewhere in between?

Dan Roam: Yeah. It was, she said to me, let me go, look at the numbers, let me go, look at what we've got in the bank and see how long we can go. And it was, do it if that's what you need to do, do it.

Whitney Johnson: So, you know, it's interesting. I'm remembering we had Shaun Ashkenazy on here a couple of years ago, and he's a chocolatier, and he was a defense attorney, and it took him not dissimilar to your experience of once he'd made the decision that he needed to do something different. It still took him several years to get there. And so it's interesting to hear here that parallel. So, it feels like a given, but it's not, around the importance of visuals. Can you talk to us about the science behind this? Like, why? You talked about this Venn diagram of visuals and storytelling. Why are visuals so powerful? What's the neuroscience?

Dan Roam: Yeah, Whitney. Thank you for the incredible question. I've spent a long-time doing research on this and it's pretty fantastic if we just start with one data point. Imagine Whitney, just imagine in your mind's eye and I'd ask your listeners to do the same. Just imagine a circle in your mind. Just a big circle. Say the size of a dinner plate or something, just an empty circle, and say that that circle represents the billion neurons that you have in your brain. What I'd like you to do is cut that circle in half from top to bottom and fill in one entire side of the circle. What I'm trying to represent with this simple visual is it is estimated by cognitive scientists, neurobiologists now that essentially half of your entire brain, half is dedicated to the processing of vision. More of the human brain is dedicated to processing vision than any other thing that we do in many cases, by orders of magnitude vastly more than language, vastly more than emotional processing, logic, math. All of those, just in terms of sheer mental computing horsepower, are a shadow of what is going on in your brain that's processing light and turning it into meaning in your brain.

Dan Roam: And it's really not a surprise if you think about it, because we talk about vision just as this sort of magic trick, which it is. But think Whitney for a second and anybody listen to this? What's happened? The moment your eyes are open, all that's coming, all that's happening is light is entering your eyes and somehow within about 1/60 of a second, your brain is working overtime to turn that light into the people that we see, the images we see, the shapes that we see, the colors, the distances, the measurement, the quantities. Everything that navigates, helps us navigate and survive the world by being able to look at it. So, for about ninety-seven percent of the population, those of us who are blessed with the gift of sight, of vision, that is more of what our brain wants to do than anything. And what I find Whitney so amazing is it's, you know, I know a little bit about your background, whether you're coming out of financial services, or business, or Harvard Business School, all the things. What I find amazing is for all of us that are in the world of business, how important it is to try to communicate a complicated idea to someone.

Dan Roam: It seems kind of insane to me that we don't intentionally take advantage of the half of our brain more than any other thing that we do. That says, Show it to me, And Whitney. Before we started this podcast, you said, Dan, what we're going to try to do is paint visual pictures for our listeners. My take is that when you have the opportunity to paint the picture for real. Why would you not do that? It's tricky now because we're remote, so we don't have the sort of the whiteboard conference rooms that we use to all get used to for years and years. But as you can see, Whitney, I've got a whiteboard behind me and I try to simulate that environment where when I'm having a conversation with someone, a client or a colleague. Just draw those simple shapes, a circle, an arrow, a triangle. This is me; this is you, the Venn diagram, we decided. So, one part of it is the sheer mental processing capacity you have. And Whitney, at the risk of maybe going on too long. Could I share one or two other data points about vision with you?

Whitney Johnson: I would love that. Please do.

Dan Roam: So, another one and I was just looking over this recently. If you were to equate your brain to like a digital recorder just trying to make the equation of neurons to bytes, the most recent data that I've come up with would indicate that if you were to convert your brain into megabytes of information, your brain has the capacity to store something that's called 2.5 petabytes of information, which I'm not mistaken. A petabyte is about a million gigabytes. That's what it is, a million gigabytes. So, we've got millions and millions and millions of gigabytes of storage information in our mind. And if you, to give a sense of what does that mean, how big is that? We, each of us, have enough brain capacity at any one time to be processing what is equal to 2.5 million full-length feature movies, which is three hundred years' worth of watching movies from end to end. That is equivalent to the mental capacity that we

have. Three hundred years' worth of movies. That's where the visuals come in. Think about the amount of images that we have stored in our mind. And it's interesting. Whitney on another note, too. Well, let me turn this into a question for you. Whitney have you? And I mean this legitimately. Have you ever had a dream?

Whitney Johnson: Why yes, I have Dan.

Dan Roam: And during that dream when you were sleeping to the degree that you remember, did it seem real when you were having it? Did it seem like an environment in which you were fully present?

Whitney Johnson: Why yes, it did.

Dan Roam: So here's the cool thing where did all those images come from that were in your dream, where you were walking down the street or swimming in the pool or whatever you were doing? They're stored in our visual memory bank. Almost everything we've ever seen in our life is stored. We have the capacity to do it. And increasingly, the cognitive scientists are coming up with these realizations that yeah, as we get older, a lot of stuff starts. We record it and it passes through more quickly. But we are always going to retain most of the things we've ever seen in our life. I find that fascinating. So back to why visual? Because that's what our brain wants to do.

Whitney Johnson: I think there was one more data point you wanted to share. Do you want to share it really fast?

Dan Roam: Sure. And it has to do with sheer neuro mechanical horsepower. And these are just numbers, but they're fun. So the average human brain weighs about three pounds, which is something around 2% of the average American's body weight. So as an average American adult, your brain, that amazing organ that we're talking about accounts for about 2% of your body weight, which is kind of a rounding error if you think about it two percent one way or the other, whatever. But that little brain of ours consumes at any one time about 1/5 of all of the oxygen that we're consuming. And about 1/5 of our entire calorie burn at any moment. So, think about this, this relatively small, lightweight organ sitting in our skull at the top of our head, which from a weight perspective from just a volume perspective is not very significant, is consuming more of our oxygen than any other organ in our body. And what is it doing with most of that? It's spending most of that just processing vision, constantly. And Whitney. If you put all those data points together, you could really make the argument that by virtue of being humans, we are. Most of us are essentially walking, talking, vision processing machines. And what I try to bring to the table, especially for people who are working in complex environments or have something important that they need to persuade or clarify, why the heck wouldn't we use the maximum amount of imagery that we can find to take advantage of that? Isn't it cool?

Whitney Johnson: It's so cool. You sounded like you were getting choked up there for just a moment.

Dan Roam: Yeah, getting choked up. I do. I get really passionate, and we haven't even started on the storytelling side.

Whitney Johnson: I know we haven't, but that was a really, you know, it's so fun for me to listen to you speak because you really do. I know you like to have the whiteboard, but even as you speak, you, you evoke images, and those images that you evoke, evoke feeling. And it's really quite marvelous. Let's now talk about the framework that you outline in your latest book, *The Pop-up Pitch*. Talk to us about this framework.

Dan Roam: Ok, well, I can talk about it for a really long time, but I won't because we'll keep it really simple. So, Whitney, the challenge I put for myself is again coming out of the business world. I was thinking that if someone's in financial services, if someone's in the finance department and someone in business comes along and says, hey, can you run me a P&L? You know, can you give me a P&L for the last two quarters? You don't go make up a new template for a P&L. I mean; we know what goes into a P&L. So, you open up whatever spreadsheet tool you're using or whatever financial planning analytics tool and you plug in the right numbers. And then if someone says, OK, it's time for a career change, go ahead and write a CV for me. What we do is we go into any one of a number of templates for a CV. We don't make up the new template. We know what goes into a resume. But here's the thing I was thinking most businesspeople, to me, spend most of their time actually communicating whatever it is that they do with someone else, whether it's a client or a colleague or a partner, or even communicate it to themselves. And yet every time we have a story to tell, we have no templates available to us. I mean, sure, there are PowerPoint

templates all day long, but none of them are a story template. So, I thought, why don't we just have a simple template that is derived from the most successful, classic, and proven to be influential story archetypes of all time so that the next time someone says, Hey, Whitney, can you make me a presentation tomorrow persuading me on what's really important about what you have to say? So instead of you panicking, opening up PowerPoint, and trying to figure out, Oh my gosh, which previous documents would I pull together, what would I put in? What are my bullet points instead? You'd say, absolutely.

Dan Roam: I've got my story template right here. I'll fill it in. It takes me about an hour, and it's not the only story I could tell, but this particular template is a very, very effective story template for telling almost every type of persuasive presentation or idea you'd ever want. And if I may, I'd like to tell you a little bit about where this template comes from and a little bit about how to use it. So, in my book *The Pop-up Pitch*, there are two toolsets. The entire book is set up as a two-hour, self-guided workshop. In the first hour, you draw pictures and there's a template there for which pictures would you draw to unpack the vision that's already in your own mind that exists in that visual engine of yours about the idea you want to share? And when you do that, we find that we are a lot smarter than we think we are. That is when you draw the ideas that you have. We're a lot smarter than we think we are, and we know a lot more about our idea than we often give ourselves credit. So that's hour number one in this virtual, two-hour workshop.

Dan Roam: The second part is where we bring in a tool that I call the 10-page pitch, and that's the template that you're talking about. How would you take the ideas that you evoked through those simple drawings and turn them into an intentional, 10 turn, emotional story? And it's 10-pages long or 10 paragraphs, and the story template is derived from the famous or infamous, depending on how you think about it. Joseph Campbell Hero's Journey Mono Myth. So for anybody who's not familiar with that, Joseph Campbell, of course, is the gentleman who spent most of the 20th century analyzing some of the greatest stories from the history of humanity and realizing that in the great myths from many, many cultures around the world, there's a very common storyline. And what made this storyline sort of accessible or understood to many people around the world, was it is turn for turn exactly the storyline that George Lucas used when he wrote the original *Star Wars* movie, the the plot from the *Star Wars* movie, the cast of characters Luke and using the Force and Obi-Wan Kenobi, the wise wizard and going into an alternate world that you're not familiar with getting off the desert planet. All of these are que exactly to this storyline of the hero's journey. And so what I did is I looked at the hero's journey, which we know from the greatest movies and novels of all time that have been the most successful is the storyline that people use. And I said, what would happen if we simplified it a little bit and modernized it for today's business community? And how would we do that? Well, I said, how about if I go back and look at some good old classic American persuasive optimism coming from Dale Carnegie and you know, how to win, win friends and influence people through positive persuasion and really looked at what are the critical beats and just good classic American sales.

Dan Roam: And then combine that with some of the latest thinking and behavioral economics from people like Daniel Kahneman or Dan Ariely, or some of the others who are realizing that for the longest time we have assumed that humans are highly rational creatures and that we make our most important decisions according to very rational criteria. And most of the science, the dismal science of economics was built on this notion of human rationality. Well, in the last 25 years, we've realized nothing could be more wrong. We're wildly irrational. But as Dan Ariely says, we're irrational in very predictable ways. So, what would happen if we combined a classic storyline that is known for being super persuasive in a positive way with good old sales skills that have been developed over 70 years that we know work with the latest in understanding of how people are predictably irrational, wove those together into one storyline that you could fill out in less than an hour. It's a template, Whitney. It's a template and you just fill it in. And it's miraculous because the outcome on the other side. Is perhaps the greatest story you've ever told about anything?

Whitney Johnson: So, we're going to put you to the test here. Do you want to talk through what the turns are at a high level? And then and I don't know if you can do this, but let's see if you can, is talk through a podcast interview in terms of this story?

Dan Roam: Oh, absolutely. And Whitney 10 sounds like a lot of turns to remember. But here's the beauty of it. And for anybody who's interested, I created a little drawing of the 10. So when you put me on the spot and say, Hey

Dan, can you recite for me, what are the 10 turns? I immediately turn to my little visual cheat sheet that shows me the entire storyline in order. So, the 10 turns.

Whitney Johnson: So, everybody, you're going to have to go by his book, which is so good and so useful. FYI.

Dan Roam: Well. And also, Whitney. What I've done is I've taken these templates and I've made them available for free on my website. So, the core storytelling template and in fact, even a downloadable PowerPoint where the 10 pages are already filled in for you. It's available. Just go to danroam.com. Scroll about halfway down the home page and all the templates are available as a free download because I believe that these tools, I know that these tools. Are needed by many, many, many people, these are the tools I wish that I had had 20 years ago sitting on that train because if I'd had this story template, it would have taken me in the colleagues less time to figure out what we were going to share. But the storyline goes as follows. What we're going to do is we're going to start Whitney by just establishing some clarity. I want to share with you what it is that my story is about, so I just give you a title. And maybe my story today is about why I think we should invest money in going to Venus. Ok, why not? Let's think really big. And by the way, I share that with you because yesterday I was down in Pasadena, California, down in the L.A. area at the Jet Propulsion Lab, which is a part of NASA Jet Propulsion Lab is fantastic because that's actually the place where they develop, design, develop and then fly and control all of the Mars rovers.

Dan Roam: So they all come out of JPL. Jet Propulsion Lab down in Pasadena. And they gave me the chance to come down there yesterday and share the 10-page pitch with their scientists, who have to pitch their grand visions to NASA because they're funded by NASA. So, if we want to send another rover to Mars, believe it or not, they have to sell that concept to the American taxpayer. So, I'm working with them on how to pitch those ideas. So let's just take why we should go to Venus. So, step number one, I just say clarity. Here's what we're going to do. We're going to go to Venus. Then step number two is, I say. Before I even tell you this story, Whitney, we need to establish some trust, so I'm going to tell you something that we're just going to call the common ground. And I might say in the case of going to Venus. We all would love to know if we're alone in the universe. Can we agree on that? Isn't that kind of a fascinating thing? So, page one was establishing clarity. Hey, Whitney, let's go to Venus. Step two is let's establish a common bond by just laying out some common ground, something that we have in common. But then the third page is now you evoke the strongest, sadly, of all human emotions, which is fear. And you say, but you know what? We can't do it.

Dan Roam: We'll never find if there's life in the universe because as long as we stay on Earth, we're not going to be able to do it. So, I evoke fear. But then after that, so now that I've established, oh, we can't do it in your mind. I then intentionally evoke the biggest human emotional switch, which is from fear to hope, because then on my fourth page, I say, but if we could do it. Think how incredible it would feel to be alive on the day when it is announced that we have discovered other life on another planet. We are not alone. So, I've gone from fear to hope. Now we've covered four steps. The fifth one is then I say, but you know what? I'm not. I take you out at the friggin knees with this one, I say. But you know what? We're never going to have that feeling because the way we're going about trying to find life in the universe isn't going to do it. We've had a hundred years of trying and we haven't found life because the way we're doing it isn't right. And I'm like. So, and we're never going to be able to do it as we as long as we keep working the way we have. So now Whitney, if you're able to follow me, I've taken you through these turns and now we're kind of in the depths of despair.

Dan Roam: All is lost. We're never going to be able to find life in the universe. But then I say but wait a minute. And now I make the turn. And this is the key moment in every story that we tell whether it's Star Wars, whether it's Spider-Man, whether it's The Hunger Games, any movie from the Marvel comic universe, or the core of your own sales pitch on any product that you're trying to persuade someone to adopt. The core turn is the one where you say, we're never going to be able to do it the way we have. But if we disrupt our thinking, if we come up with a truly bold, truly different aspiration, what will happen if this time instead of continuing to bumble along as we had in the past? We made the bold, disruptive change that we've always wondered what would happen if we did it this time and that, Whitney is the moment we'll return from despair to the realization we can actually do it. And then from that moment, we say, well, how would we do that? Could we actually do this crazy move? Yeah, we could. You know, it's not so different than other things we've done in the past. And then we say, Yeah, we could get some courage around it. We could actually do it in this new crazy way. Instead of in one particular example, instead of looking out at the farthest ends of the universe, what would happen if we looked at Venus? What would happen if we looked at our

nearest neighbor? Because guess what? It turns out that Venus has a lot in common with Earth in many ways, more even than Mars does.

Dan Roam: Wait a minute. Instead of looking out that way, what would happen if we looked that way even closer to home? What could we do it? Sure. The mission would look not so different from maybe what we've done with Mars, but it's going to be hard and then you build it back up. So, you go through establishing the courage that we can do it, then you just commit to one or two things. And through that commitment, you'll get an early win. Hey, maybe in inventing some of the new technologies that we need to go to Venus. We might discover some things that would be super applicable right here on Earth to help us address climate change, for example. And then you get, at the end and this is the crowning moment. Turn 10, the long win. And if we can galvanize ourselves to actually do this and we can because we've proven we've done it before. Not only will we discover other life in the universe, perhaps, but what we will truly discover is ourselves. And think what we can do then. So what I've done Whitney is I've taken you through. I hope that made sense. Well, let me pause. Did that make sense?

Whitney Johnson: Completely. It completely made sense. And it's so funny because when you first said it, I was like, well, that's kind of an outlandish thing to talk about. But then, as you were telling me the story, I'm like, yes, let's go to Venus, So it worked.

Dan Roam: And Whitney, if I may. This is the story. Ok, so I can share this now. This will all go public in the next couple of months, but I'm doing a giant project right now with Google, where. You've heard of Google. They're a little, a little internet company. You might be familiar with them. So yeah, so there are shifts going on, all of which we are all aware of in the underlying infrastructure of the internet. Because, the internet, which many people tend not to think about, most of the content on the internet is available to us for free because it's advertising-based, which most of us have grown up understanding that we have this sort of expectation that the content on the internet, most of it ought to be free just because it is and we get used to that well, the reason that the content on the internet appears to be free is because it's advertising-driven. And most of the reason that many, many people, publishers and advertisers pay for those ads is because it's the greatest advertising medium in the history of the world, because they can know a lot about the people who are looking at their ads or making purchases and the way in the past, for the last 20 years that that information has come through is through something called the cookie. We've all heard about the third-party cookie, the little piece of code that sits in our browser that allows someone to track us.

Dan Roam: Well, because the cookie is not very highly privacy-preserving the cookie is going away. And Apple's already shut down third-party cookies on their sites. So, the reason I share this with you is there will be a story coming out in the coming months that is Google's perspective on effectively, how do we grow the free and open internet as we know it today by evolving new technologies that are more privacy-preserving than this cookie that nobody particularly loves? And the reason I bring this up is we're telling the story using exactly the same template as the one that I just described to you on why not go to Venus? This is a universal storytelling template that has proven to be usable, no matter what it is, Whitney, that you need to persuade someone, whether it's to rethink how the internet works or I've got a new product. I'm a solopreneur and I've developed a new content marketing product available for customers online. What would happen if, instead of talking about the features of my product, I introduced it to you by telling you the same aspirational story as why we should go to Venus? It's amazing. Whitney And. It's so much fun to have put this together and to share it with people.

Whitney Johnson: Is this for your online meeting magic story?

Dan Roam: Online meeting magic is? Yeah, exactly so.

Whitney Johnson: Ok, so tell us the story. Tell us the story with that.

Dan Roam: Whitney as an author and you yourself, I'm sure that we remember not so far long ago those days when we used to get on planes all the time and fly off to conference rooms and auditoriums and meeting rooms, perhaps around the world, and go up in front and talk to people and share our ideas in person. And then, of course, as we all know, 19 months ago or so, that stopped. And since so much of my business, so much of my revenue was generated by traveling and sharing these ideas in person, I realized I didn't need to just pivot. I needed to totally disrupt my own business because I had been disrupted. 2/3 of my revenue is now gone. Oh, my. That hurts. Happily, Whitney.

For years, I've been able to build and run successfully an online training tool. There's something called the napkinacademy.com. That's a tool I developed 11 years ago and have maintained ever since as a way to offer online training for people who are interested in visual storytelling. And so I had a leg up on a lot of my colleagues and clients who suddenly found themselves locked at home and did not know how to give a good presentation online.

Dan Roam: So I had the technology in place already to expand my online offering, which is what I did, and I created a new program, to your point, called Online Meeting Magic: how to deliver the best remote presentation of your life with minimal preparation. And so what I did is I created a 10-page pitch around my own new product that I then shared with people online to convince them, or to hopefully persuade them to give my online meeting magic program a try. So I applied. Well, it's the positive, the negative way we'd say it is. Eat your own dog food, which sounds so awful. So how about the positive way is you drink your own champagne. So I used the tool that's within the training to actually help sell the training. And it was, let's just say it was successful because I used my own template in an hour to tell the story that I wanted to tell.

Whitney Johnson: So one of the things that I find myself wanting to kind of riff with you for a minute. So in our work, we have what we call the S-Curve of learning. And as you can imagine, as I'm reading your work, I'm getting very excited because it's visual. And so I thought, Yay, no wonder it's so sticky. It's visual and people can get it really quickly. So one of the things I thought would be really interesting to do, is in my head, I'm and for our listeners maybe who are new, it's the S-Curve. At the launch point, you're grasping for knowledge to accelerate, you're trying to figure out how you're going to move up that curve. So it feels slow, even though it's not slow. And then you get into the sweet spot, you're increasingly competent and confident. You're in a groove. It looks and feels fast, and then you reach mastery. You've figured it out. You're no longer learning. And so the growth is in fact slow, so you need to jump to a new S-Curve. And so, Dan, one of the things I thought would be really fun to do is find a way and riff for a minute on how do you map this S-Curve of learning this this this visual that helps you think about what growth looks like against your 10-turn story? And here's my initial thought then I want to get your response. So I was thinking initially those pieces of clarity and trust and fear and hope and sobering reality are at the launch point and then the gusto. That big turn is gusto and courage and commitment. We can do it. You move into the sweet spot and then the reward and aspiration are in mastery. But one of the questions I had is I was listening to you think or talk and I was thinking as you were talking, it's almost as if the entire ten turns is at the top of the curve when you're making the decision, if you're actually going to do something new.

Dan Roam: Wow. Well, Whitney, there's a lot there. I love the S-Curve. I love it not only because it's visual, but because it is also incredibly elegant. It has this simplicity that comes from the other side of complexity, that famous notion that I wouldn't want something super simple, because then it doesn't adequately address what happens in real life. But if you push through understanding the complexity enough, you do arrive at elegance on the other side, and I think your S-curve has done that and the pacing of it that at the launch point, things are slow and you have to get motivated and then you reach this kind of point, this sweet spot where you're in flow and things are moving really, really well. But then it is going to peter out at the end. And one thing I'd like to suggest, and I didn't know this was in your S-Curve until you just set it right now that once you reach the top of the S-Curve, you have to start over because that which was very exciting to you at some point in the past may have worked its magic. You may have once you've attained mastery on it, you need to now Disrupt Yourself again. Did I understand that correctly? Yes, you did.

Dan Roam: So one of the things about this hero's journey story that we talk about that I've turned into this ten-page pitch is that. At the risk of getting overly theoretical, it's kind of fractal, and what I mean by that is no matter how granular you look at any step of the journey or no matter how far you zoom back out, the same patterns keep repeating. It's your S-curve. Within the S-curve. So I think there are two ways to answer your question. The first one is that the 10-page pitch matches exactly, beat for beat, Your S-curve, and in exactly the way you just described. And at the same time when you hit the end of your S-Curve. This is back to my 10-page pitch. We've now established common ground. Hey, Whitney, we're rocking. Our business is solid. Things are awesome. Yay, we're successful. That's the common ground that we reestablish at the end. But guess what's going to happen the moment everything becomes chill? Whitney, what happens again? We hit another bump. So even at mass, now we're going to hit a different bump at a different point in our life, and we're going to start it over again. Does that make sense?

Whitney Johnson: It makes so much sense, and I love that. And I will tell you, I'm actually I'm flying over to Denmark tonight to give a speech on Tuesday, and I am really dramatically rethinking my presentation, my speech,

because of what I'm learning from you? So I want to share that with you. All right, so when you said, Fractal, I know we're jumping around, but I have to read you something that I think you will really appreciate, and this is from the epilog of my book that's coming out. Are you ready?

Dan Roam: Ready!

Whitney Johnson: Every S-Curve of learning is a wave where there's one wave. There are many thousands infinite in variety. And then I say the S-Curve of life at the very end is on inspection and introspection is waves within waves, within waves, within the wave? That's the fractal.

Dan Roam: It's completely fractal. Isn't that fascinating? And I've got to ask you, Whitney, I know time is limited. The S-curve, where did you draw it first? Do you remember when you first drew it or saw it? Where did that come from?

Whitney Johnson: I don't remember first, first, but I do remember so this is when I was still working with Clayton and we had started the fund with him and his son. And we were using the S-curve that was popularized by Ian Rogers to think about innovation and how quickly it would be adopted. But at some point along the way, as I tend to do, is I applied disruption to people. I found myself applying the S-curve to people. I just had and I think probably the best way is this vast, intuitive leap of this applies to people. We can use this to understand what growth looks like, and that was the beginning of the AHA that I had. And then and then I've spent the last 10 years trying to look at the science and the neuroscience and the psychology to put that foundation under that leap that I had made. But that's where it started.

Dan Roam: Well, Whitney, the reason I was asking you this and thank you for that is because, there is that moment when you're looking at an image and if it was the innovation S-Curve and all of the sudden, that image, which is so elegant and simple, begins to like, literally resonate in your mind and in your mind, you're able to see other applications of it. It's I have a friend who I work with now, who is a very, very successful businessman, and he's made vast sums of money by being incredibly insightful in looking for patterns, in how complex businesses operate and optimize, and where those businesses tend to go off the rails. And he sees a pattern there that isn't so dissimilar from your S-curve and that what he's done is he's been able to turn that pattern into the basis of software. And the reason I bring up my friend is it similar to what you've just said is he will often say, Dan, when you look at business or people or innovation or even natural systems, they're all the same. They're all the same. They're all the same. And I'm thinking, if you can pull out as you've done with your S-curve, what is similar between this notion of business innovation and the notion of personal disruption, then you are truly onto something that is giant.

Dan Roam: It's a fundamental aspect of what it is to be alive and to succeed. And you've been able to represent it with this visual, and I am all for it and part from my own back to me. Yes, back to you. Well, because it is a beautiful summary of what I'm putting together in this 10-page pitch, and you might think about the 10-page pitch as a zoom in on steps in your S-curve where we realize, frankly, because we're human and we're imperfect and life is complicated, it really ain't all that smooth. There's a series of bumps, but if you can thoughtfully navigate those bumps and not lose your way. You will attain the success you want, whatever that success looks like, but just recognize the bumps are there and recognize that every time it goes up off the top, it's going to come down. But when it's down, that doesn't mean it's over because you can bend it back up.

Whitney Johnson: Two final questions for you. Yeah. Well, first, an observation. So for me, I am feeling the reward and aspiration achieved of having a lovely conversation. So my question for you is what was useful to you in this podcast or in this conversation. So it may not be anything you said or I said it may be just a thought that you had. What's useful?

Dan Roam: Oh my gosh, Whitney. It was the realization that we've come together over the last maybe five, six minutes with this, this view, this synthetic view that the lines that I've been drawing to try to describe what matters to me are not so different than the lines you've been drawing that describe what matters to you and the kind of the epiphany, the realization that there is something deeper. And I want to explore it further about these lines that go through our lives through all of us. The big takeaway from me Whitney from this conversation to answer your

question is there is something really worth exploring. In what are the common lines, themes that govern all of us, and the more we can tune into those, the more successful and happy we will be, whatever that success looks like.

Whitney Johnson: So beautiful. I love that the common lines that govern, or thread their way through our lives. Any final thoughts?

Dan Roam: Let's draw those lines.

Whitney Johnson: Well, said. Dan Roam, thank you so much.

Dan Roam: Whitney my pleasure.

Dan is such an amazing storyteller. Here are three key takeaways from our conversation. Number one, towering constraints can change everything. Dan's story of transformation didn't come from a big budget or a large staff. It didn't come from a polished PowerPoint or a slick product demo. It came from being completely unprepared, left dangling in the wind, and it materialized on a napkin. As Dan explained, this stripped away the pretense of a fancy presentation and led to authentic conversation, which ultimately won the day. When you feel constrained by circumstances or other people, confront it head-on. Successful people don't sit around wishing constraints weren't there. They find ways to work around them better yet, they find ways to create with them. For a disruptor, a constraint is not a check on absolute freedom, it is a tool of creation.

Number two, we know a lot more about our own ideas than we give ourselves credit for. Dan said this during the conversation, and it's so relatable, but seldom said we can't all be artists like him, but we do have pictures in our minds of how things ought to be. The trouble is getting those pictures out of our heads and into others. That's what Dan's tools are all about, not just helping us with visual communication, but giving us back some confidence, even if I'm having trouble articulating it. This is still a great idea.

Number three, the switch from fear to hope. I know you felt it, too, when Dan was taking us to Venus, he stressed the importance of the big switch. How could we ever achieve this? There's no possible way unless we make a huge disruption through our conversation, Dan and I both realized how similar his storytelling model is to our S-curve. The switch from fear to hope is the knee of the curve, the inflection point that changes everything on the road to mastery. Dan's framework is about convincing others that your ideas are great. Our framework is about convincing yourself that you can be great.

For more on visual thinking, check out Alex Osterwalder in episode 161. For more on storytelling, listen to Ed Catmull in episode 210. And for more on embracing constraints, listen to Episode 140. For those of you that would like a copy of Dan's book, email me at wj@whitneyjohnson.com and share with me a reflection from this conversation, we will make five available. I read and respond to every note.

Thank you again to Dan Rome for joining us and for taking us to Venus. Thank you for listening. Thank you to our producer, Matt Silverman. Audio engineer and Editor, Whitney Jobe. Assistant producer, Steve Ludwig. And production assistant, Cassidy Simpson.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.