

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 250: STEVE LUDWIG

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, disrupting who you are to slingshot into who you want to be.

Whitney Johnson: Hey, wait, who are you? That's my line. Why are you disrupting this podcast? That's probably what all of you are wondering, right this very minute. So, this is Steve Ludwig. He is one of our disruption advisors, coach extraordinaire, former VP of Marketing, Communications, and Strategy within CH2M, a Regent Emeritus for the University of Colorado. And yes, he is a former professional broadcaster. Steve, hi.

Steve Ludwig: Hey, Whitney, how are you? Thanks for having me.

Whitney Johnson: I am glad you're here. And before we actually get started, before we started, went on tape, you were doing all some fun warmup exercises. Will you do one of those for us on the air because it was absolutely fun and charming?

Steve Ludwig: Of course, whether to do to die today at a minute or two to two, a thing distinctly hard to say, but harder still to do for the beat to add a quarter of two in a rata ta ta ta ta ta ta ta. And a dragon will come with the beat of the drum at a quarter of two to two today and a quarter of two to two. So, it's an old acting exercise to get your mouth warmed up.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, I love it. Ra ta ta tat ta to ta to. All right, everybody. That is why Steve is interviewing me. Ok. Over to you, Steve.

Steve Ludwig: Thank you. In today's episode, obviously, I'm talking to Whitney, and we're talking about her latest article for the Harvard Business Review. It's great. It's called Manage Your Organization as a Portfolio of Learning Curves. This is adapted from her new book, which I've read. Can't recommend it highly enough: Smart Growth: Grow Your People to Grow Your Company, which applies the S-curve of learning to teams and organizations. Now, as you know, from listening to this podcast, the S-Curve is a great framework for building your career, but it can also be a great management tool to start conversations with team members. It's a common language about talent management that managers and team members can use together. You can zoom in so you can tailor a performance plan to an individual, and then you can zoom out and you weave everyone's threads together into the whole cloth of your organization. In the article, Whitney breaks the conversation into three key areas that we'll talk about today. Talent development, succession planning, and team configuration building an A-team. But Whitney I understand that there were a lot of great stories that you had that, of course, couldn't make it into the final article, so I hope we get to cover a number of those stories. But first of all, the buckets, let's start with the talent development bucket. Now, the S-curve of learning gives you a common language, right? Can you talk about that?

Whitney Johnson: The S-Curve of learning and most of you know this, but a very, very quick recap. It is something that we developed. It's based on the diffusion curve of Everett Rogers. And what it does is it models growth; it

models personal growth. So, every time you start something new, you're at the base of the S, where growth is going to feel slow, then you're going to put in the effort and you're going to accelerate into competence and confidence and growth will feel and be fast. And then you'll reach mastery where you're very good at what you're doing. But because you're no longer learning, you will get bored, and growth is slow. So, you've got slow, fast, slow. That is how you grow. And it gives you this simple model for what growth looks like now when you're thinking about it. From the talent development standpoint, what will happen is whenever someone says, hey, I feel like I'm at the launch point, you now have this common language. They're single signaling to you. I'm struggling to gain traction. And if they say to you, I'm in the sweet spot, you'll know they're feeling a sense of momentum, the sense of competence, a sense of autonomy that they've got this in hand. And if they say to you, I'm in mastery, the message is clear I need more. I need a challenge. So, in the article, Steve, we have some great stories like Sumit Shetty. He's a manager at SAP in Bangalore, India. He talks about how he uses the S-Curve to build a team. We've had him on the podcast.

Whitney Johnson: You can read about him in the article. There's also this great story about Brittany Boyd, who's the chief marketing officer at the NBA's Philadelphia Sixers. But there are also a few stories and snippets that did not make it into the article that I loved, and so I wanted to share them with all of you. The first story is from Scott O'Neal. He's the former CEO of HBSE, which owns and manages the Sixers and the National Hockey League's New Jersey Devils. Now we talked about it briefly in the article because he hired Brittany Boyd to the Sixers, but there are a few stories or snippets that didn't make it into the article that are like these nested stories like the Russian Nested Dolls. So, one of the stories is Scott O'Neal. He's the former CEO of HBSE, which owns and manages the Sixers and the National Hockey League's New Jersey Devils. We talked about it briefly. In the article, because he hired Brittany Boyd to the Sixers, but there are a few more stories that I wanted to share with you now. Scott O'Neal is one of those people who continually asks himself, how am I going to develop talent? How am I going to develop this next generation of leaders? And basically, when they get to the top of an S-curve, what's next? So, the first person that he thought about talent development with is a woman by the name of Donna Daniels. She's currently the GM of the Prudential Center in New Jersey. She says, about Scott, before she came to the Sixers, and she had worked for him before.

Whitney Johnson: She says he saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. He worked with me on what I was good at and he put me in a place to succeed. But what's interesting is that then she herself. So, this is the "nested dolls". She is also good at talent development. She finds people she wants to work with, people that she knows can jump to new S-curves, and then she works with them. And when I interviewed her, she said her journey is a lot of S-curves, but it's always people first. She says her most satisfying moments are when people go on to do something bigger and better. And yes, it is painful, but she feels a sense of satisfaction. When I interviewed her, I found out that her father was a coach. So, as she was growing up every few years, they moved. So, for her, this idea of movement of jumping to new S-curves for herself and for the people around her is very instinctual or instinctive. And she's also comfortable bringing in people that can replace her because she always knows that there's going to be a next step. And by the way, Donna is the manager or was the manager of Brittney Boyd, who you'll read about in the article. And she started in guest services, and today she's the chief marketing officer at the Sixers. So Donna Daniels is a person who develops people. So, question Steve, what stands out for you in that?

Steve Ludwig: Well, there's two things. One, you and I have both been at very large organizations, and what I really like about the S-curve and what you're sharing is how that common language really is easy to grasp onto. I've coached this because of you, and it's really great when you hear people talk about the S-curve. It's really intuitive once they understand it so that that stuck out. What's also interesting to me is, you know how unusual it is to do what you've described. A lot of organizations give a lot of lip service to growing talent, right? And it's really these are outliers because it's so unusual. And I think that's why you're bringing them up as great examples is because it's hard to do. Why is it so hard for managers to develop people? Are we insecure? I mean, you've talked to executives all over the place, but it seems like the mid-level people have the harder time bringing in people because they're afraid they're going to lose their position.

Whitney Johnson: But even so, I think you could argue that someone who's even not middle management, I think anybody who feels like there might not be a place for them going forward, and I think that's what struck me with her is that to your point, sometimes we don't develop people because we don't know that there's a what's next for us. And in her case, she instinctively felt there would be a what's next? Because there always had been with her father because she'd seen that every two or three years, he gets a new job. And part of what I love about the S-Curve is it

gives people that model, that language to talk about where am I and what's next? I also interviewed Jake Reynolds, who's now the president of the New Jersey Devils, so we're still within the HBSE constellation. He was at the Sixers, as well as Jill Snodgrass, who's a Sixers VP. So back in 2013, they were tied for the worst team in the NBA, and yet they still needed to sell tickets. So, you've got the worst team in the NBA. They need to sell tickets.

Steve Ludwig: I do not want that job. Thank you. Yeah. How do they do that?

Whitney Johnson: Right? And so, they're asking themselves, how do we get people excited to come to work? They brought in these brand-new recruits straight out of college, so all people at the launch point of the S-curve and they said, you know, we're going to train you. We're going to role-play. We're going to teach you how to sell. We're going to identify your needs. We're going to help you grow. And we're talking about the 2015 season where this is like a farcical season. It is a terrible, terrible season. They have all these employees that are straight out of college. So, what do they do? In addition to growing them, they also send handwritten notes to their parents because their parents are probably thinking, you have a degree from college, you are at the worst team in the NBA. This is a career dead end, but they said, Nope, we're going to develop you. They got their parents behind them. So, here's what happens. Worst team in the NBA, year one they're number five in new full-season ticket sales. Year number two, they're number two. And years three and four, they're number one and number one, respectively. So, they had this process of we invest and develop our people. So, you grow yourself to grow your people, to grow your organization. So, this, to me, is such a compelling, powerful story

Steve Ludwig: That is really interesting. There's two other things I'm also hearing in this that's really great is by bringing in these young employees. They're at the bottom of the S-curve. They're really open to trying new things. They don't have a set way of doing something. And that way they tapped into all that creativity. So, I'm sure it was a great team effort with incredible leadership by Reynolds and Snodgrass. The other thing I'm doing is they really took advantage of embracing their constraints, like these are major. Like, how the heck do you grow ticket sales when you're a terrible team? They embrace that constraint, big time, and they got really creative. So that's really interesting. Are there any other stories?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, I have a couple more because I love talking about developing people. So, we also talked to WGU, Western Governors University, which is actually the largest university in the United States and got a couple of practical tips. So, I love, love being practical. I like thinking about how are we going to inspire ourselves to do something? But then how are we actually going to do it?

Steve Ludwig: Can we tell people a little bit? So Western Governors is the largest university that no one's ever heard of. They're an amazing, online college that really helps working adults complete their degrees. They do amazing work. They're cutting edge. They do a lot of things, right. They are an amazing organization. Sorry, I wasn't sure if people were familiar, so I thought I'd add that color commentary Whitney. I interrupted.

Whitney Johnson: Oh yeah, I'm so glad you did. They've actually, they are a disruptor in higher education. And I agree they are a fantastic organization. We've actually had Scott Pulsipher, who is the president on the podcast as well, so you can go back and listen to that if you would like. And we've had Scott O'Neal if you want to listen to him as well. So here are some practical tips. So, Bonnie Petit is the Chief People Officer. Two things that they've done that I thought were really interesting is number one is they will nominate people to do a 10 to 12-week secondment with another team or department, which is basically a micro-S-curve. This allows them to develop a new toolkit, learn about areas that they may know little or nothing about. You know, you think about sometimes in a large organization, you want to jump to a new S-Curve and people say, well, you don't know anything about this. Yeah, go get some experience and then we'll think about it. Well in its still early days. But of their initial cohort, 60 percent of those people that have done a secondment have actually gotten hired into that new role for which they were not necessarily qualified.

Whitney Johnson: So, I think that's a great example of those micro-S-Curves. Another thing that they've done, which I think is really powerful, is lots of people think I want to be a people leader. I want to manage people, but not everybody, and we think we want to do that because we think we're supposed to want to do that. But not everybody wants to do that, and not everybody is good at that. And if you're not good at it, you can do a lot of damage. Clayton Christensen said management is the noblest of professions, which means if you don't do it well, you could be pretty

dastardly. Not intentionally, of course. So, what they do is they will have people do an 8 to 10-week internship, if you will, of working alongside people leaders. So, they take these subject matter experts or domain experts, they get to explore that possibility and then say, oh, do I really want to do this or not? And I think that's another really powerful micro-S-Curve.

Steve Ludwig: And then before you go on, that is so interesting because. There's so many people that go the only way to move up in my career. I'd have to manage people, and I'm terrible at managing people like I'm terrible at it. I want to do well, but I don't really want to do this. And so, the fact that they're doing this that's super interesting is they get people to see it. And it's like, Oh, that's not my career path. That's not who I am. And that's a lovely example.

Whitney Johnson: And one of the things that I think is so important and I advocate, we advocate for so strongly is that that up is not the only way up. There are so many ways up and it can be sideways and backwards and down to get to where you want to go. There's a wonderful quote from Scott Pulsipher, who I mentioned, who's the president of WGU, I think really encapsulates what we're trying to get at with the S-curve of this ability to help people grow and develop. He says with six thousand employees, you have to figure out how you influence the one. The individual still matters and that individual needs to know I care about them as much as I care about the six thousand. And the same is true when we think about our 136,000 students. How do we communicate that you matter to us? And I think one of the solutions, I won't say the only solution, but certainly one of them is to know where your people are in their growth, know where they are in their S-curve, and then make it possible for them to grow. So that's those are some of the stories that I thought were really compelling and interesting when it came to the talent development piece of the article.

Steve Ludwig: There's a lot to think about, and I really appreciate those stories. So, the second part that you cover in your Harvard Business Review article is about succession planning. And when we talk about succession planning, we're usually talking about what's next for the organization, how do we make sure it survives and who's going to be in this leadership role? But you argue in the article, and I think it's really interesting is like it's even more important to ask in succession planning what's next for the individual? Why is this so important, do you think, for building the future of the company?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, because if you'll. You do need to think about the future of the company. But if you'll think about what's next for the individual because the fundamental unit of growth in any organization is individual, you will have effectively thought about succession planning for the organization. For example, if you have a whole group of people on your team who are in mastery, then you know that if you don't figure out a plan for them, then not only are they going to get complacent and or leave, then you also have a challenge with the organization. But if you will figure out the succession plan, the what's next, for each person in your organization, then that also helps you solve for the future. There's a couple of stories, a great story in the book, not in the book. There are great stories in the book,

Steve Ludwig: Lots of great stories in the book, lots of great stories.

Whitney Johnson: But in the article, it's from Kara Goldin and Hint Water. There's a great story talking about succession planning there, so you can go ahead and read that. One really practical example that I want to share with you. Actually, this is an even part of the article, but it's a story that I just thought of, so I'm going to share it with all of you right now. So, one of the companies that we've actually talked about in prior books is a company called Chat Books. So, Chat Books is a company that, they turn Instagram photos into books. And they have been around for about seven or eight years. I actually am on the advisory board because they've built a culture where people really want to work and like to work. People stick around. They don't leave, which means they gain mastery along their curve. And so, you have a whole group of people, a cohort of people who are saying, what's next? And so a couple of months ago, the CEO, Nate Quigley, brought us in and said, Hey, can you administer your S-curve insight tool? Tell us where people are. We love your framework. It gives us a vocabulary to talk about this language.

Whitney Johnson: So, can you administer this tool? So, we did well. What we found, and no big surprise, is that many of their senior team was in mastery along the curve. Now that they had this language to be able to say, here's where I am in my growth, I'm actually in mastery. You had the chief marketing officer be able to say, oh, that's what's

happening. I love Chat Books. I love the people I work with, but I'm at the top of my curve. And so I need a new curve. I need a new challenge. And in her particular case, so you think about succession planning. She was able to say and have this very amicable conversation with the CEO. I need to jump to a new curve. And so, for her, that new curve is to be the chief marketing officer at another startup. But by understanding that by having that conversation, the succession plan for her, they now have a succession plan and were able to do this in a very measured, very reasonable way of finding the next chief marketing officer for Chat Books.

Steve Ludwig: So, before you go on, so, sorry, what I what really is interesting that I'm hearing there's a number of things, but because they have a common language and I know we talked about this, it took the emotion out of it. It took the blame or the wrong or guilt. Or it's like there's nothing wrong. It's just what's so. Rather than like, how dare you leave us? Or how dare? No, we all took this thing, and we now see it, and I can go to you, Whitney. I'm on the top of my S-Curve. It's like, oh, OK, what are we going to do about that? And so that was that's very powerful. The other thing before you move on, and I know you have other stories. Can you explain a little bit briefly, what is the S-curve insight tool that you mentioned?

Whitney Johnson: So first of all, that's absolutely correct. You're able to have you take the emotion out of it because you just look at it and say, this is nothing to do with you. It's just in my brain that's running this predictive model that says, OK, I had this model. I was trying to predict what I would have to do to be successful on this S-Curve, and I figured it out. The problem is solved, and now I'm no longer getting dopamine. My brain is bored and indeed a new challenge in order to continue to grow in order to feel a sense of wholeness, a sense of efficacy, it has nothing to do with you. So yes. Now, the S-curve Insight tool, so this is really cool, this is something that we've developed over the last couple of years as a company, and what it does is it allows you to see you can have this instinctive sense of where you are in your growth, but it allows you then to every person on your team to see where they are in their growth and say, OK, I thought I was in the sweet spot, but I'm presenting in mastery and now you have this artifact to have this conversation with your manager. And so, you've got this tool again, this framework, this language, this tool to have this conversation about where people are in their growth. And the thing that is so important about this is it does not matter if I, as your manager, say to you, well, you're in the sweet spot like, you're doing great, you're fantastic. I'm so happy. If they feel like they are in mastery, and they're also bored and they're also demotivated. Well, that's going to predict their behavior, not what I think

Steve Ludwig: You're in my sweet spot because you're fulfilling a need I have, and I don't want you to go anywhere. So, I'm saying you're in the sweet spot. Right?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, exactly. But their behavior is predicted by where they perceive they are. So, this goes back to the succession planning question.

Steve Ludwig: So, these are great examples from organizations and top leaders. I know a lot of people, you know, the person that's listening to this right now might be a mid-level manager or somewhere in their career where they don't have charge of an entire division or an entire company. How would you suggest that they bring in an S-Curve or these thoughts at their unit level? So, this can be really powerful, even if the entire company doesn't have the S-Curve? If I run a unit and I bring this into my team, at least my team has this really valuable skill that I can help them and grow them and develop them. How would you suggest I do that?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, absolutely. And this happens all the time. So, I mean, at its absolute simplest, I mean, yes, of course, you can. You can listen to this podcast. You can read the book Smart Growth, but if you want to get it at its most simplest, and this is why the S-curve is so sticky and why people hear about it in two or three years later, they remember it, is just get a piece of paper and draw that S the base of the S from the left to the right, that's flat. And then you have that steep, sleek back of that curve and which is a sweet spot. And then you get this plateau at the top from left to right, which is flat. You've got your launch point, your sweet spot, your mastery. Your slow, fast, slow, and say, Where do you think you are in your growth? Do you feel like you've got a lot of upside? Do you feel like you're just exhilarated or are you feeling like I need a little bit more? And that becomes the starting place to have that conversation? And now you're giving them a language, you're making it safe. And perhaps most importantly, you have just shown to them, demonstrated that you care about their growth upside. So that is the starting place. Yes, you can get the tool, you can read the book, but at its most simplest, just draw an S on a piece of paper and have the conversation.

Steve Ludwig: Nice, and there's lots of newsletters on your website and all the transcripts for every podcast are available. So there's a lot of stuff for free if you need something quickly.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, absolutely. I think, Steve, one other thing that I would want to share here is let me just finish out on Chat Books. Then one other quick quote from Lee Caraher that I thought was really compelling. So, so back to Chat Books. Meanwhile, back at Chat Books, you have the...

Steve Ludwig: Wait hold on. Meanwhile, back at chat books,

Whitney Johnson: Bubble everybody. I love it. So, you've got, so you've got the CMO who we talked about. So her new curve was somewhere else. With the president, it was a very different conversation, which was, I'm the president. We've kind of scoped out our roles and responsibilities. But he was bumping up against the roles and responsibilities of the CEO. So, Nate. So now they had this conversation again, they had a language, they had a framework to have a conversation to say, hey, can we really look at and be very clear and defining our roles and responsibilities? Because right now, based on what I'm doing today, I feel like I'm in mastery. But if you could sort of move off my S-Curve basically, so I have more headroom on this S-Curve, then I will feel like I'm in the sweet spot. So, it led to that conversation of redefinition of roles. And then the third person who's the chief technical officer also on mastery, was taking on some new responsibilities that we're going to push them at the launch point. And it gave him permission where everybody's like, you're supposed to be the expert. He was able to say, Well, no, I'm at the launch point on certain projects and now he had permission and could talk to people about, Yeah, I'm uncomfortable. I'm supposed to be uncomfortable, but that means I'm going to be able to stay here a lot longer because I have growth upside in my current role.

Steve Ludwig: And that growth is so important you have to have something to grow to. Yeah, that's so, yeah, so interesting. The third major point you talk about in the article is developing a team, building your A-Team. Funny, that should be the name of a book, right? And you also talk about it in the framework of developing a portfolio of S-Curves. Can you talk about what that means and how do you get that idea?

Whitney Johnson: So, I mentioned Lee Caraher a few minutes ago, and we interviewed her on the podcast several years ago. She runs a company called Double Forte. It's a marketing boutique, and she said, I basically assume every hire will eventually leave. There aren't enough S-Curves in my organization to accommodate all ambitions. And then, she said, so I assume my whole team was going to get poached. I don't like that, but I do assume it because if I don't have a team that's ready that other people want, I don't have a team that's relevant in the marketplace. And I thought that was really powerful. It's like back to Donna Daniels. You don't necessarily want people to leave, but you want people. You want people to be ready to leave. You want to know that they're going to leave again. Back to this idea of succession planning, if you have a clear plan for what's next for every individual on your team. Then you will by definition, have a clear plan for what's next for your organization

Steve Ludwig: And you shouldn't be caught flat-footed then, right? If you know what's going on where people it's like, Oh OK, it's time, it's time for them to try something new. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. So, in the article in the Harvard Business Review article that we've been talking about, the third idea we talk about is developing a team, building an A-Team like the name of your book. And you talk about that in the framework of a portfolio of S-Curves. Can you explain what that means?

Whitney Johnson: My background is in investing, so I think about portfolios. And if you're building a portfolio, a wise investor is not going to put all of their money in one or two companies, just like you're not and therefore you're not going to put all of your energy. You're not going to place all your future on one or two people. So, what you want to do is you want to have a diversified portfolio. And in this particular case, you want to have diversification along the S-curve of learning. You want to have people who are in the launch point of their growth. Where they're asking those questions like, why do we do it like this? You want people who are in the sweet spot who can ask questions of why do we do it like this? But also, here's why we do it like this. So, they're able to ask and answer those questions. And you also want people who are in mastery who can say, here is why we do it like this. And in order to really be innovative as an organization, you need people who are at different points along the curve. Now, a starting point as you're thinking about building that portfolio is to have about 60 percent. So, it's a standard bell curve distribution.

About 60% of your people in the sweet spot, and no more than 20% at the launch point, and 20% in mastery, respectively. But depending on your industry, depending on the stage of growth of your company, you're going to tweak that.

Whitney Johnson: But that is a good starting point for you to think about. If I really want to grow as an organization, I need to diversify my learning curves and have people at different points along the curve. One of the things that I think is really interesting is you're like building this portfolio is that you can say if you're in a large organization, you can say, Yeah, I want 60 percent in the sweet spot, et cetera. But what if you're a startup? For example, we talked in the article and also interviewed these two entrepreneurs, Syd and Shea McGee. They have a show on Netflix, but they started out about 10 years ago, and they made all sorts of mistakes. They were very early entrepreneurs. And so what they could have benefited from was, they were at the launch point of the curve as entrepreneurs, it would have been useful for them to have some people advising them who were either in the sweet spot or in mastery. And in fact, we talk about this in the article. Yang Xu, who's this wonderful executive at Kraft Heinz, about when she went into a new role, they said, what portfolio curves do we need to put around you in order to be successful? Now, let me tell you one story that is not in the article. So, there's a brand, Velocity Partners. It's a startup private equity firm, and they've invested in companies like Barbecue Guys. And so, what they thought about is, OK, we're a brand new firm.

Whitney Johnson: We've now, they've now invested in three companies, but they needed to cobble together a skill set portfolio. So, what did they do? Well, they had two people Steve Liebowitz and Austin Ramos, who are experts at private equity, so top of the curve in terms of investing, structuring deals. But they also wanted to be able to position themselves as we're going to invest in this company and we're going to put a lot of energy into marketing so that we can build value around the brand of this company. They were at the launch point from a branding perspective, so they brought in someone who is at the top of the curve and mastery. Drew Scheinman, who has expertise in brands, including Coke and Madison Square Garden. Meanwhile, they brought in sports influencers who are also at the top of their curve from a sports perspective Steve Hutchinson, LaDainian Tomlinson, and the Manning family, in particular Eli Manning, who from a sports perspective are at the top of that S-curve, but perhaps from an investing perspective. And in the case of Eli Manning, who is working with them now as an investor, is sort of more at the bottom or the sweet spot of his S-curve. So, they matched the needs of that s curve of what they were trying to build as a private equity firm with the skill sets of the people that they brought in. So, lots of different ways to think about this.

Steve Ludwig: It's really interesting once you explained the portfolio idea like you have your. I'm not an investor like a sophisticated one, but it's like, all right, I have my big cap funds, my mid-cap funds, I have my bonds, and I have the other stuff and it's like, that's a balanced portfolio. And what you're talking about is a balanced portfolio of talent in your organization, which really makes a ton of sense. One of the questions that occurs to me, is managers need to step back and take the time to think about this. What do you think? Why do you think people don't take the time? Because this all makes sense. And it's, you know, and what you're providing is this great framework that we've been talking about. But I really need to step back and look at this objectively. Why do you think what prevents me from doing that?

Whitney Johnson: Part of the power of this S-curve is that people sort of do it intuitively, but if they don't have a way to think about it, it's just it's just too much, right?

Steve Ludwig: It's overwhelming.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, it's just overwhelming. You're just trying to, you know, ship a product or get something done. And so to take the time and think about, OK, where are my people and what do I do with my people? But what I have found in our business and in the companies that we advise as soon as we say to them, OK, where are you on the S-curve in your current role? And they're like, OK, I think I'm in the sweet spot, but that's because I'm at the launch point with a couple of my projects and mastering a couple of my projects, so it all balances out to the sweet spot. Great. Where's your team? And let's take the time. Let's draw that S-curve and let's go through each person on your team if you haven't already taken the S-Curve Insight tool, which you can do, because that'll get you that answer faster. But let's analyze this, then what you can do and what will happen there. It'll start to get very intuitive, is if you have a person who is really struggling, you can say, OK, are they struggling because they're just at

the launch point and therefore need training or encouragement? Are they struggling because this isn't the right S-curve for them? Ok, we've got two different outcomes on that basis.

Whitney Johnson: Then you start to say, well, if I've got people in the sweet spot and everything is working, I need to make sure that I'm helping them focus and I'm focusing on them and saying thank you to them. And if I've got people in mastery, what I know is, all right, I need, they're saying they're good, but I need to be very, very watchful and probably give them a new challenge because I don't want, well, if they're not performing well, I do want to lose them. But if they are performing well and they are presenting in mastery that I need to solve for it. So once you've got this simple visual model and 30 percent of what goes on, our brain on in our brain is visual. As we have learned from Dan Roam on who we've just had on the podcast, then you can start to just very quickly make a decision. Ok, this is what this person needs right now on the basis of where they are in the curve. And this is what our business needs right now on the basis of where our business is on the S-Curve. So simple decision-making because you've got that simple visual model.

Steve Ludwig: As I'm listening to this, I'm thinking if one of my managers and I've had many at great organizations and they've generally been really good people, but a lot of times they struggle with how to talk to me about my own career and my career growth. And as we have talked about the great resignation and people jumping ship to go to new organizations and the research that says people don't quit their jobs, they quit their manager. This seems to me like a great way to let people know that you really care about them. If you go, oh, where do you think you are in the S-Curve? What can we do for you? Oh, you care about me, you. You're paying attention to what I need in my career, and that's going to make me more loyal to my manager and more loyal to the organization, I would imagine.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, absolutely. You know, longevity at an organization is there are a number of different variables, but a very important variable is do I believe that there is growth upside for me here? And I strongly believe that this is not the great resignation. I mean, it is, but what it really is lots of people saying. I want more, so what it really is, is it's a great aspiration. This pandemic, it forced us into movement. It pushed us off an S-Curve. We've got the post-pandemic S-Curve versus the pre-pandemic S-Curve. We're now all moving. We're realizing that we're far more resilient than we thought, and we want more. And so that's what this is. And so, if a manager, if a boss, if a business owner can say this isn't the resignation, this is the aspiration. I'm going to have this conversation. Where are you in your growth? How can I support you? What do you want? What do you need? Here's what I can give. Let's see if we can find an intersection between the two. Then you will have tapped into that fundamental need, this imperative that people have to grow because I believe that growth is our default setting, which, by the way, is the very first line of the book. Smart growth is that growth is our default setting. We aspire.

Steve Ludwig: And I love the great aspiration because that actually rings true. Like that really resonates. I think that's really going on for a lot of people. This has been great do you want to wrap it up for us and kind of summarize the three points we've talked about?

Whitney Johnson: Yes, I do. So, the S-Curve, everybody, as you're listening, you'll want to go read this article. We put a lot of work into it to make it really simple and useful for you. And I think if you're thinking about how can I evangelize these ideas inside of my organization, yes, you need to go buy the book, but you can also use this article. So, you can use it for talent development. You can use it to think about succession planning. You can use it to think about configuring a high-performing team. And when you see, back to this idea of the portfolios, when you see everyone in your portfolio as is fundamental buy, there's this dual truth that you're holding. You're saying to yourself, OK, I recognize that growth in a role may be finite, but the growth of this person is not. And so, people who are growing, they're going to grow organizations. And so, I want you just to hold both of those together. And then I think what would be fun is to wrap up because I know I talked a lot about Scott O'Neill and something that Donna Daniel said that I think just encapsulates or summarizes this conversation well. She said, "I don't have a lot of goals, but I did have for over a decade a goal to again work for Scott O'Neill." She said it's fairly spectacular to work for him. And I think that that is I think that's what we all aspire to do. And I'm going to say this, and I know it's really cheesy and corny, but I loved this line and it got cut, so you all get to listen to it. You want to be a boss who cares enough about the growth of your people to throw them a curve.

Steve Ludwig: That's great. That's a great way to wrap up And Whitney. You're fairly spectacular. Work with yourself as someone that works with you. So, thank you. And hey Whitney, I'd like to thank you for being a guest on your own podcast. You've been a great interview.

Whitney Johnson: Thank you for having me. It's been a pleasure.

Ok, so I got to wrap up, everybody. Thank you to all of you for listening. Thank you, Steve, for interviewing me. This was a lot of fun. Thank you to Matt Silverman, our producer, Whitney Jobe, audio engineer and editor, and Cassidy Simpson, our production assistant. I'm Whitney Johnson. Thank you, Steve Ludwig for having this conversation.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.