

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 252: SMART GROWTH CHAPTER 1

Whitney Johnson: Part 1: Launch Point. Chapter 1 Explorer. "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood leads on to fortune. On such a full sea are we now afloat and we must take the current when it serves or lose our ventures." - William Shakespeare

Whitney Johnson: Shakespeare sheds light on the decision we face at the outset of a journey, whether literal or metaphorical, which course do we choose? How do we decide which tide we will take at the flood? In 2002, Mike Rowe launched his life-changing S-curve. There's no way to sugarcoat this in a sudden raging flood of human waste in a sewer beneath San Francisco.

Whitney Johnson: At the time, Rowe was host of Evening Magazine, which he described to me in 2020 as a local interest show with a fairly tame format. I always hosted it from wineries or art openings or restaurants, he said. But I could go anywhere in the city I wanted to. Then he got a trajectory-changing call from his mother. Peggy Rowe was calling about Carl Noble Rowe's 91-year-old grandfather, a gifted tradesman.

Whitney Johnson: Rowe grew up next door to Noble in Baltimore County, Maryland, and idolized him. Your grandfather's not going to be around forever, Peggy told her son. It would be terrific if before he died, he could turn on the television and see you do something that looks like work. Pop, as Rowe called his grandfather, was the guy who could take your watch apart and put it back together, blindfolded. Through much of his childhood, Rowe wanted to be like his grandfather, but frequently he was the bumbling assistant instead. On one such occasion, he messed up a concrete mixture for his grandfather. It's like the third thing I got wrong that day, and that was the moment when Pop said, "You're my grandson, I love you. You can do this the rest of your life if you want, but you're beating your head against the wall. What you're really enamored of," he said, "is not the business of building patios or porches or renovation. You're obsessed with the trades, but I don't think you're really obsessed with the construction trades. I think you're in love with the idea of being a jobber. The projects that have beginnings and middles and ends." Carl Noble, grandfather, and handyman was talking like a true smart growth leader. When Rowe received the wakeup call from his mother years later, he decided to embrace his jobber mentality. He thought, why not host evening magazine from a factory floor or a construction site or a sewer?

Whitney Johnson: So, Rowe dialed up the city supervisor and got permission to go underground, Rowe and his cameraman trailed a veteran sewer inspector named Gene Crews. They experienced the hazards of the trade firsthand when a lateral line, the pipes from homes that feed into the main sewer, suddenly exploded. I'm squatting there in about a foot of indescribable filth trying to open the show while my cameraman is filming me and the lateral blows up and hits me in the side of the face, which is pretty funny TV. I was covered by many thousands of thumb-sized roaches. I was assaulted by a rat the size of a loaf of bread. I was baptized in a river of raw sewage. At that point, Gene, the sewer inspector who was busy hammering out bricks in the mainline and replacing them, looked over his shoulder and on camera, he said, "When you're done playing with the local wildlife, why don't you come over here and give me a hand?"

Whitney Johnson: Another TV host might have been tempted to throw away the tape, burn their clothes and bathe in bleach. But Rowe saw it differently. That footage became a short segment on Evening Magazine called Somebody's Got to Do It and it got me fired. Of course, people are sitting down to watch their beloved evening magazine. It's dinnertime. They're having a meatloaf, and there I am, crawling through a river of waste. It was the wrong segment for that show, but I loved it. The station let him keep the footage. Few could have guessed how that

decision would give birth to one of the highest-rated reality shows of all time, reaping tens of millions in profits. I showed the footage to Discovery Channel, Rowe said. Discovery changed the name from somebody's got to do it to dirty jobs. And I began a new phase of my career at 42. Uniquely, on Dirty Jobs, Rowe wasn't a spectator, but an on-air apprentice to pig farmers, roadkill cleaners, hot tar roofers, sewer inspectors, all in service of the question: What would the world look like if no one did this job? Perhaps, too, he was asking, what would the world look like if no one did the work his grandfather did? Dirty Jobs premiered in 2005 with Rowe's grandfather watching. It transformed reality television, inspiring dozens of similar shows about Alaskan bush pilots, alligator hunters, and more. Entire cable networks would not look the way they do now without Mike Rowe. More meaningful to him is his ongoing work to shift attitudes in the United States about the workers and farmers that drive the economy. The essential workers that get dirty on our behalf.

Whitney Johnson: Before the effluvium in the sewer led to three Emmy nominations, Rowe's was a checkered career with years in the construction industry. I was a nightmare on the job site, years as an opera singer, even more years as a host on the QVC home shopping channel. He was fired three times. And a multitude of short-term TV gigs. He recalls, "From 1993 until 2001, I probably had four hundred jobs. Working for the History Channel, for Nat Geo, for the Discovery Channel, impersonating a host for anybody who would hire me, infomercials, regular commercials, documentaries, talk shows, pilots. I'm not recommending that you do four hundred different jobs, but when you're in the explorer stage, consider micro." Until he hit the sweet spot at age 42, Rowe made an art form of exploration. He then made exploration the model for his hit reality TV series, Dirty Jobs.

Whitney Johnson: Explore phase defined. Explore is the first phase along the S-Curve of learning and the first phase on the launch point. Your destination is the top of the S, and your pathway is the curve winding to the top of that s. But as an explorer, you first take time to evaluate the potential of various S-curves and decide where you want to be. I am here. Do I want to be here? The explore phase is when you consider your destination, even if it seems like the destination chose you as it sometimes does. It's when you do your homework before committing to a course of action, lest you find yourself at the top of an S-curve, you don't care about. Non-exploration, the failure to make conscious, informed choices in life leads to a crisis, whether quarterlife midlife or three quarters life. You can allow yourself to be carried on whatever tide is rolling out. But smart growth requires that whether captain or castaway you choose your own ship. What do you want to explore? Have you quietly abandoned the thought that you can still transform your life or learn new things? Or do you have a bucket list of ideas and aspirations you're itching to tackle? Perhaps you're considering a job or role change, starting, or buying a business, getting married, becoming a parent.

Whitney Johnson: Maybe you're exploring how to volunteer in your community, how to donate to causes you care about or how to successfully vacation. You could play the guitar, pick up a sitar, become a tap dancing Tik Tok sensation, cook garden or cook from your garden. Perhaps you want to learn to invest, find a religion, wallpaper a room, or teach your old dog new tricks. Maybe you want to conquer the territory of self, to develop greater patience and become more focused, resilient, or benevolent.

Whitney Johnson: Each is a voyage awaiting a captain. Exploration is key because it helps us make good decisions, despite a mind-boggling array of choices. Most of us do not suffer from a lack of possibilities over abundant options can be paralyzing and undermine or discourage action. A few decades ago, grocery stores carried about 8000 items. Today, they carry 47,000. Barry Schwartz, professor of social theory at Swarthmore College and author of The Paradox of Choice, explains that an abundance of choice can complicate decision making, resulting in inaction or an action postponed by uncertainty and frustration.

Whitney Johnson: When you do make a choice due to FOMO, fear of better options, you're more likely to be dissatisfied because you think an unchosen item might have been better. If we struggle to choose laundry detergent, it's no wonder we're mentally exhausted when weighing the complex variables of education, career, and life purpose. Entire industries exist to help companies make multivariable decisions, and yet we, by ourselves, are making these types of decisions every day. Consider the kinds of complex mental analyzes, and pro and con tradeoffs that go into purchasing a car. Never mind making a truly momentous personal or professional decision. Our prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that juggles all the options we're considering, doesn't have unlimited processing power to constantly consider how one of the infinite numbers of new things we could do fits with what we are already doing. It usurps an enormous amount of energy to do this.

Whitney Johnson: Tired? Drained? Of course, you are. We're also paralyzed by fear. Exploring a new S-curve of learning is filled with a threat of uncertainty. Our brain likes novelty, but when there's too much novelty, our limbic system, whose job it is to detect and respond to threats, sounds an alarm.

Whitney Johnson: This is the emotional and intuitive part of the brain, commonly referred to as the lizard brain. Its warnings generate stress that would be cortisol and hyper alertness, thank you, adrenaline. Which causes us to overemphasize the negative. Why did I decide to explore a new S-curve? There are a hundred things that could go wrong. Negativity and fear make us even more risk averse. To protect ourselves, we reject the new. This is one reason lizards don't make great CEOs, and we stop growing.

Whitney Johnson: Learning to go slow, faster. Understanding the S-Curve process in general reduces anxiety, fear, frustration and impatience just as having a map or navigation system eases worries on an unfamiliar trip. It makes it easier to become an explorer and start the journey. In the explorer phase, things will feel slow, possibly uncomfortably so, here's why. Time seems to expand when you're doing something new, when we're mostly engaged in familiar tasks, our perception is that time passes quickly. There is little or nothing memorable for our brains to process. When we do something new, the brain is busy recording making memories of unfamiliar experiences. Our perception is that time has slowed. This partially explains why time seemingly passed more slowly when we were children, and everything was novel but sped up as we aged in the brain compressed a year of routine days into only a handful of memorable moments. Making decisions is taxing. This part of the S-curve can be tiring. We are exploring a variety of options to decide what S-curve we want to try, whether it's a new role or a new behavior. There's a lot of analysis involved, and the decision-making part of our brains doesn't have unlimited processing capacity. We are simultaneously engaged in all the normal affairs of our daily lives and frequently experience cognitive overload. A traffic jam in our brain. Progress is not discernible. Our brain is making memories and neural maps, but they aren't yet apparent.

Whitney Johnson: I like to use a simple analogy to illustrate this key point. I call it the lily pad of learning. Water lilies begin their lives as a seed or tuber, pushing new roots into the mud beneath the water. From this mucky beginning as stem grows up through the water toward the sun. These are critical first steps, but they often go unnoticed under the surface below detection, slow. Once the stock reaches the surface, it will sprout its unique circular leaves, blossoms will appear. Meanwhile, the roots are creeping through the mud, shooting up more stalks, leaves, and flowers in a vast network. The literal, physical expansion of neural networks in our brain is similar. It starts small and slow, almost indiscernible. But as we continue to explore, growth accelerates. Like lily pads on the water, the results of our growth become evident only gradually, and the foundation of that growth in the brain remains concealed, like roots in the mud. But just as we eventually see lily pads on the water, we know the neural networks are developing because the results begin to flower in our lives. When growth is indiscernible, we can feel uncertain and anxious. Why haven't I figured this out yet? We may not want to persist. I thought I wanted to do this, but crikey, this is hard. We may even want to skip over this phase. I want to grow. Why do I have to take time to explore? As an explorer if you feel like you're in the muck, this is normal. Just understanding that the math of the S-curve of learning dictates something is meant to feel slow, can reduce our feelings of anxiety and impatience. This allows us to actively explore this new S-curve without discouragement instead of possibly abandoning it when results don't instantly appear.

Whitney Johnson: Marco Trecroce is the chief information officer at Four Seasons, the first CIO ever for this global luxury hospitality company. Before starting there, Trecroce was between jobs for two years. He did some private contracting, worked for a couple of small businesses temporarily, but he says none of them was the right fit. This lengthy exploration period was uncomfortable, slow, but ultimately fruitful. Four Seasons was on the short list of organizations Trecroce wanted to work for, his first boss at Four Seasons was the then CFO, John Davison, who instead of pressuring him to get something done yesterday as many bosses do, encouraged Trecroce to take his time getting familiar with the organization and his people, thinking through what needed to be done, and creating a plan. For the first six months Trecroce had space to build relationships and begin to help the various departments and divisions across the enterprise with critical pending IT decisions. Then a five-year plan was outlined. One of Trecroce's first big challenges was working with HR to select its next generation software. When he joined Four Seasons, that decision had been under discussion for over a year. When Trecroce took charge, there was pressure to select a legacy platform. Instead, he chose Workday, a relative newcomer with a different cloud-based model.

Four Seasons was its one 178th customer. Trecroce said, "It was pretty apparent to me this was the way to go. But it took a little while before everyone was comfortable with this decision. The time spent building relationships, understanding needs and developing trust paid off. If I look back 10 years ago, it really transformed the business." For newcomers to an organization, to Trecroce says there is a sense of I've got to go fast, I've got to prove myself, I've got to change fast. His boss Davidson's advice was the opposite. Take your time, build relationships, and get to know people. Davison, now the CEO of Four Seasons and a smart growth leader, understood that Trecroce was on the launch point of the CIO curve and gave him time to explore, even if that meant he wasn't seeing results right away. Davison was confident that roots would grow in the mud.

Whitney Johnson: The explorer's key questions. To decide if a stretch of terrain warrants further exploration, here's a seven point template of questions I suggest explorers ask.

Whitney Johnson: Number one: Is it achievable? Do I believe I can attain it? The early 20th century author Neville Goddard said, "The drama of life is a psychological one and the whole of it is written and produced by your assumptions." Your assumption guides all of your conscious and subconscious movements, so inevitably that it actually dictates events. Wistfully thinking that would be nice. Offered signals we don't think a goal is possible and, therefore, won't be. If instead, we are optimistic saying, I am so happy I have achieved this as if we already have, there is a kernel of belief that it is within reach. In the explorer stage, your asking, can I see myself doing or being this? Often, though, there is a gap to bridge knowing that our assumptions guide our movement, how do we change our assumptions so "that would be nice" becomes "this is nice."

Whitney Johnson: While it's true that there are unattainable objectives, it is also true that there is a nearly limitless range of things that are possible. They require only that we believe and act on our belief. To quote Shakespeare, again, "Assume a virtue, if you have it not." Four centuries later, we paraphrase: fake it till you make it. In 2000, Marcus Whitney moved to Nashville, Tennessee. He was a 24-year-old dropout from the University of Virginia. "I had a one-year-old and another child on the way and was waiting tables six and a half days a week," he told me his family was living in an efficiency hotel. I didn't have a lot of leeway or slack in my life. Whitney did, however, have a starting point. When I was nine years old, my late uncle, Otis, who was a programmer at IBM, gave me a PC junior. I learned a programming language, basic, and the basic principles of how computers work. As a child, he had envisioned himself as a programmer, so in his mind, a better life was possible. But it had been 15 years and his computer skills were old and rusty. Still, Whitney started studying programming books between serving customers at restaurants. After working 12-hour shifts, he'd put in another four hours on the computer at home. He applied for hundreds of jobs with little success. It wasn't easy visualizing his goal but having my back against the wall was helpful for removing a lot of extraneous narratives that weren't helping me go where I wanted to go.

Whitney Johnson: In his book, *Create and Orchestrate*, he describes how he got through the slowness of the explorer phase. There was more to it than just hard work. "My mindset was critical. There wasn't a lot of evidence around me that I could be successful in making this transition. I had to create a mind state supportive of my endeavor. I didn't achieve that mind state by believing I was becoming a programmer. I achieved that mind state by believing I already was a programmer. This distinction is very important, by believing I already was a programmer, even though it wasn't obvious to others. I bypassed many of the limiting thoughts and doubts about my ability to become a programmer. I never said I was a great or even a good programmer. I just believed I was a programmer."

Whitney Johnson: This small tweak of believing we already are what we want to be rather than becoming it has significant downstream effects. Marcus Whitney's first paid gig as a programmer was a barter deal. His wife needed a midwife, and the midwife needed a website, so services were exchanged. A year later, in 2001, Whitney got his first paid job as a programmer. In 2003, he was hired as the fifth employee at an email marketing company, later sold to a bigger firm. The founder, his former boss, Clint Smith, remembers him well. Marcus had the ability to play up a level or two and ended up running Hall of Engineering. Several startups, two exits, loads of desire, persistence, and 20 years later, Marcus Whitney is the founder of Jump Start Nova, the first black health care venture fund in America. He's the CEO of Health Further, a health care strategic advisory firm, and is co-founder and part owner of the Nashville Soccer Club, the Major League soccer team in Tennessee. If we are willing to do the hard work of changing our assumptions, we will begin to believe our goal is attainable. Belief is where an explorer starts.

Whitney Johnson: Number two, is it easy to test? Is there an easy way to test whether I want to be on this particular S-curve of learning if I decide to stay on this S-curve, will my initial pace be sustainable? In 2019, I decided I wanted to be physically stronger. There were many options. I could join an Everest expedition, become a mixed martial arts UFC fighter, or run. Setting aside the desirability and believability for a moment, you probably can't picture me as a UFC fighter, either. How easily could I test if I wanted to jump to one of these physical fitness curves? Of the three, running is by far the easiest. I tested it by committing to run five minutes a day for a week, 30 seconds running and 30 seconds walking. After a week's exploration, I had enough information to know I wanted to be on a running S-curve and I wanted to run at least one 5K. Now I had to decide on an initial pace for how quickly I would increase the time and distance I ran each day. Five minutes in week one, ten minutes in week two, up to 15 minutes in week three. For me, that was too ambitious.

Whitney Johnson: I was looking for sustainable, long-term behavior that would evolve from conscious and challenging to natural and automatic. I settled on small increments. A 10-second increase each time I ran. This was a manageable level of effort to which my brain would say, I can do that. I did that yesterday, even on days when I wanted to just curl up in a chair with one of our cats. It took about 18 months to get to the top of my 5K S-curve. But because I made it easy enough to start and sustain, I persisted. I now run three times a week. The behavior has become automatic. I no longer think of running as something I do, it's part of who I am. I am a runner.

Whitney Johnson: Find simple and easy ways to test new S-curves of learning. I know this sounds obvious, but I found, both with myself and in coaching others, that once we feel inspired to do something new, we feel compelled to start really big. But when we need to make space on our cluttered, mental, and emotional shelves for something big, we find there's little room. It's discouraging. Where do we even start? Start small. Set your initial expectations and incremental increases, so small, so laughably small, that you deactivate your inner procrastinator, each tiny benchmark is its own easy test. Is this S-curve feasible? Can I sustain this long term? Take baby baby baby steps.

Whitney Johnson: Top management consultant Darrell Rigby knows early testing is essential to the success of any major innovation. Rigby's fascination with innovation stems from his days at Harvard Business School. Rigby told me he was something of an oddity there, a castoff in his words. He went straight to business school after university without first paying his dues on the bottom rung of a company ladder, as many management students do before they matriculate. Landing a crucial summer internship would be a high hurdle for Rigby, and things weren't looking good. He was dismissed as too young and inexperienced. Then he caught a break. Bain decided to give me a chance, Rigby said, referring to the now prestigious management consultancy Bain & Company. At the end of the summer, Rigby came away with a full time offer from Bain. He's now a partner and head of Bain's global innovation and agile practice. Rigby has spent much of his tenure being an expert explorer. His process is to constantly ask himself, how can I make my job at Bain the perfect job? Step one, explore an idea for disrupting the job. Step two, test the idea. Step three, sell senior executives on the change he has in mind. Bain welcomes innovation, but you need to make your case. It helps to have leadership that lets you explore and test. For example, 15 years ago. Rigby saw an opportunity to start an innovation consulting practice. He pitched the idea to Bain's operating committee. "I said, let me try it for six months, and if it doesn't work, I'm happy to find something else. But if it does work, then we've created a new platform that could be good for our clients and good for us." They gave him six months to test. As the leader of Bain's retail practice at the time, Rigby had the idea of helping retailers innovate in order to adapt to the meteoric rise of online sales. Working with some remarkable partners, Rob Markey, and Jimmy Allen, who were willing to share their budget allocation and give visible support. Rigby was able to bootstrap the experiment, build credibility, and ultimately establish the innovation practice at Bain. As Rigby explored better ways to innovate. He came across agile practices in the technology departments of many retailers. He says, "At first, agile, scared me. I didn't like all the jargon and it was the language. I wasn't convinced I wanted to learn, but eventually decided I had to do it." More exploration. Smart growth leaders willingly try new things and jump to new S-curves of learning, even when the leap is challenging. Rigby's new S-curve was testing agile methodology. It has since become a core component of nearly every practice area in the Bain system. 40 years and counting, Rigby is still in his dream job.

Whitney Johnson: Influential management thinker and professor at Columbia University, Rita McGrath, has found that the root cause of failure in new business ventures is viewing untested assumptions as facts. She explained to me that business leaders are susceptible to being caught up in a project emotionally without taking a hard look at the probable costs and outcomes. With their eyes on an attractive prize, leaders often underestimate the difficulty of getting there, substituting optimism for data. They explore without testing. Especially with a high stakes opportunity,

it pays to devise a low commitment test. Minimal cost, a short time frame, and a relevant metric before fully committing to the course.

Whitney Johnson: Number three, is it familiar yet novel? Is the S-curve of learning I'm exploring familiar enough to be navigable yet novel enough to promote growth. Explorers should look at S-curve opportunities in terms of both their familiarity and their novelty. You need some of both. Familiarity helps you relax and feel safer. Too much familiarity may mean stasis. The unfamiliar in small doses surprises and delights and can lead us in new directions. Darrell Rigby wasn't familiar with agile methods, but he knew enough to see their relationship to other areas and take on the challenge. In large doses, novelty and uncertainty create anxiety and fear. For me, training for an Everest expedition or becoming a UFC fighter are currently too unfamiliar.

Whitney Johnson: It's important for explorers to realize that there will be some discomfort at the start of any worthy S-curve. Psychologists use the term premature cognitive commitment to identify the human and animal tendency to cling to familiar assumptions, even when new facts are brought to light. One recent study posits that of the 6200 or so individual thoughts that we have per day, only a small percentage are new. Cognitively speaking, we rarely explore new routes. To illustrate the dangers of this, consider that in India, an elephant calf is easily kept in place by being chained to a small stake in the ground. How do you keep a 6000-pound adult elephant from taking off with the same small stake and chain? The elephant is held captive by its premature cognitive commitment. I didn't escape this before. I can't now. Similarly, we may think learning something new is an impossible hurdle when in fact, it's just a token barrier that's easily overcome. In early 2020, I interviewed Tara Swart, a neuroscientist and former psychiatric doctor, now a senior lecturer at MIT Sloan School of Management, who told me, "The brain becomes less malleable. The child's easy gift for picking up a language, a subject or an instrument gives way to the adult's old dog, new tricks mindset." From 25 to 65, you really need to do things to push yourself through that S-curve. It has to be something that's sufficiently difficult, that it makes you sweat mentally as it were to actually change your brain. Academic research suggests that there's an optimal ratio of tried and true to the new. Brian Uzi and Benjamin F. Jones, professors at the Kellogg School of Management, analyzed 17.9 million research articles over 10 years. They found that academic papers that combined about 85-95% familiar sources with 5-15% novel sources were twice as likely to be high impact papers as measured by citations. Their conclusion seems to concur with our general human tendency to want some new knowledge to build on the firm foundation of what we already know. It's the same in music. When hitmaker's author Derek Thompson studied why songs become popular. He found that 90 percent of the time people listen to music, they're listening to a song they've already heard. Storytelling follows the same pattern. The hero's journey narrative is so cemented in our cultural consciousness that from the Odyssey to the Lord of the Rings, we take it for granted and are shocked when his story deviates from it. That means that only 10 percent of the time we are listening to songs we haven't heard before and watching movies that are truly original. Surprisingly little of what we consume is actually new.

Whitney Johnson: Extrapolating from the research, do you have approximately 85% of the know how you need to succeed on an S-curve you're exploring? Is at least 5-15% of what you're considering novel enough to stimulate your brain to change and grow. Entrepreneur Jamie O'Banion was exploring her option to start a business in the cosmetics industry. Much of her exploration told her this was familiar ground. Her father, Dr. Terry James, is a well-known dermatologist who owned a cosmetics lab while O'Banion was still in elementary school. The science of skin care was dinner conversation in her childhood home. As a teenager, she accompanied her father on visits to European and Asian laboratories and manufacturing plants. Later, she was a part time model and spent time working in marketing and product development at her father's company, where she was exposed to cutting edge science and scientists, makeup artists, creative directors, and brand professionals. The industry was familiar, but O'Bannon also wanted to start her own business. That was novel. A new frontier of unfamiliar leadership and management skills. She founded Beauty Bio, and the mix of familiar and new paid off. In her 2011 original product launch on Home Shopping Network, her inventory sold out in minutes. A 2016 rollout of a proprietary micro needling tool netted \$4 million in sales in 24 hours. Today, Beauty Bio is \$100 million plus business. This may sound like overnight success, but O'Bannon's exploration of this S-curve started in elementary school. Her launch point of slow growth lasted two decades. She has successfully coupled beauty product science and continuous innovation while learning essential business skills, like putting together a profit and loss statement. She's leveraged the familiar and embraced the unfamiliar to achieve impressive smart personal growth. Her business, not coincidentally, has grown smartly too. Is the ground you will cover sufficiently novel?

Whitney Johnson: Number four, does it fit my identity? Is this S-curve a learning compatible with my identity? Is it compatible with how I see myself and how others see me? An S-curve worth pursuing will dovetail with who we aspire to be. Exploring areas of ourselves and possibilities that have no apparent connection to who we are right now is exciting. It may even be admirable, but it may also mean we get voted off our current island. People around us, including those we care deeply about, may be heavily invested in who we are now. Our family, friends, colleagues, and community. Religious devotion is a prime example. If a particular faith is central to your family's culture or history, even glancing at a map of different belief routes could trigger social backlash. It's less difficult to take on a new learning curve if it aligns with our current identity. Here again, balance is necessary. If the new S-curve we're exploring is too aligned with who we already are, the potential for growth may be too low. But if it's too far out of alignment, then the price of reaching for a new identity may be too high. I'm not suggesting we automatically pass over opportunities that are significantly divergent from our current identity, but we do need to explore the cost to our meaningful relationships and our sense of self before we make the leap.

Whitney Johnson: Victor Wooten is a music man. This is his identity. He is a bassist, an original member of Bela Fleck and the Fleck Tones and the winner of five Grammy Awards. Long before he took the stage at Carnegie Hall, Wooten's first gig was with an eclectic quintet, the aptly named Wooten Brothers Band. His bandmates were his four older brothers. Victor was six years old. I was born into a band, he says. An older brother started Victor on bass guitar when he was two. "Music is a language," Wooten says, "it's a lifestyle." Today, Wooten's range of instruments includes bass, cello, upright bass, guitar, keyboard, drums, and percussion instruments. He became a music educator, then a producer, and then the owner of Vic's Records, his own indie label. We could imagine Victor Wooten taking on virtually any learning curve in the world of music. But is it part of Wooten's identity to write a novel? It might be surprising to learn he has until we meet Wooten's protagonist: three musicians doing battle against an enemy who is trying to destroy all musical sound. Writing a novel was, well, novel, but the creative act and the subject he chose were in harmony with his identity. However, we'd probably be surprised if we learned that Wooten was exploring computer programming. This doesn't align with how he shows up in the world to himself or to others. It doesn't mean he couldn't be a computer programmer if he wanted to give that a try. But he would need to be prepared for the emotional, psychological, and social costs that can be attached to such a significant identity shift. Concluding his popular 2019 TEDx talk, Wooten signs off with, "My name is Victor Wooten. I'm a musician." A declaration of a positive, personal identity.

Whitney Johnson: Number five. Is the reward worth the cost? Is what I will gain sufficient to offset the tangible and emotional costs of scaling this new S-curve? Exploration includes a lot of calculating of cost and benefits. Karen S. Carter started out as an intern at the Dow Chemical Company when just a freshman at Howard University. Carter desperately wanted to finish college, but she knew that her widowed mother could not afford to pay for all four years. Even if it came with the stress of working and studying at the same time, graduation was a dream for which she was willing to pay the price. She gradually ascended the corporate ladder, but not in a straight line. Early in her career, she was offered a position in human resources. It was neither what she was doing nor what she wanted to do. She declined. The vice president of HR quickly made it clear to her that they weren't asking her if she wanted the role they were telling her it was her next role. Either grow or go. Carter wasn't enthusiastic about exploring this opportunity, but Dow was too good to lose, and it was a caring push, not a shove. Carter was in an ecosystem where her potential was recognized. Dow had made a point of periodically offering her plum new roles and growing experiences, plus Dow was invested in her growth in the strict financial sense it had paid for her MBA. Her reluctant yes to the HR job was yes, to a career she couldn't have imagined. Carter is now Dow's chief human resources officer and chief inclusion officer. She describes it as the ultimate stretch assignment. It's challenging and fulfilling to oversee people operations at a firm with more than 50000 employees. Her creed is that of a smart growth leader. True growth and comfort cannot coexist. She says it's not a question of if, but rather when we get upended. Disruption is a pay it forward principle. So share the tough love. Number one get disrupted. Number two seize the growth opportunity. Number three, share it with others. Carter grows herself, grows her people, grows Dow.

Whitney Johnson: Sometimes S-curves aren't totally voluntary. Circumstances or other people who see potential in us give us an unexpected push. Pre-planned or unforeseen, thrilled or terrified, you'll need to determine whether the reward of being on a specific curve is worth the cost. Even if the reward doesn't initially seem greater than the cost, if you're like Carter, you will find a way to make the numbers add up.

Whitney Johnson: Number six, does it align with my values? Is this S-curve of learning aligned with my core values? Explorers, ignore this question at your peril. In 2007, I attended the last day of class for the course, Building and Sustaining a Successful Enterprise, taught by my mentor, the late Clayton Christensen. In his final minutes with 80 of the world's best and brightest young business students. He could have used his bully pulpit to say many things. He focused on building and sustaining a happy life. He said in just a few months, you will graduate from Harvard Business School and embark on what to many, including yourselves, will be prestigious, lucrative, high-profile careers. But if you want to also have happy lives, you need to know the purpose of your life. That last day of class lecture eventually became a TEDx talk, and a book titled *How Will You Measure Your Life?* In which he shared, "While many of us might default to measuring our lives by summary statistics such as number of people presided over, number of awards, or dollars accumulated in a bank, and so on. The only metrics that will truly matter to my life are the individuals whom I've been able to help one by one, to become better people. When I have my interview with God. Our conversation will focus on the individuals whose self-esteem I was able to strengthen, whose faith I was able to reinforce and whose discomfort I was able to assuage. A doer of good, regardless of what assignment I had. These are the metrics that matter in measuring my life." The measurement of our life in the final analysis will fall short of what we hoped, if the work we are doing, the time we are investing, and the things we are accomplishing, don't lead us in the direction of our deepest aspirations and our most deeply held values. Nearly two centuries ago, in just a few short miles from where Christiansen lived and worked, Henry David Thoreau said of his time spent at Walden Pond, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately and not when I came to die discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life for living is so dear."

Whitney Johnson: S-curves that become an emotional, spiritual, or physical detriment to us may let us grow, but it won't be smart growth. Not all growth is advantageous. Not all S-curves lead to where we want to go. The S-curves of learning we explore and ultimately choose to pursue should be true to who we want to be. That has been the case with Angela Blanchard. For over two decades, Blanchard served as president and CEO of Neighborhood Centers Inc., now Baker Ripley, the biggest community development nonprofit in Houston, Texas, ranked in the top 1% of charitable organizations in the United States. Much of Blanchard's career has focused on lifting the lowest income people, which overwhelmingly included newly arrived immigrants and people of color. She helped them find homes and jobs and obtain U.S. citizenship. Blanchard believes the United States is lucky to receive these high achieving new taxpayers and wanted to help smooth their transition. "My focus over the last decade," she told me, "Has been on the experience of people displaced by war or weather." Blanchard is a seasoned executive who has directed budgets approaching \$300 million. But she prefers to describe her work with a single word, service. Her top value and her true identity are to be a helper in the world to those who have lost everything. Now, a senior fellow of international and public affairs at Brown University, Blanchard told me she's obsessed with bringing immigrant stories into the public consciousness. "It's to remind us of our humanity," she said, "Because all of us are essentially shipwrecked, trying to figure it out together." Blanchard is living a smart growth life, in part because her expertise and her core values are totally aligned. Blanchard's case seems easy. She has such a clear sense of her identity and values that the exploration hardly seems difficult but assessing if an opportunity is aligned with our values is usually easier said than done. We are complex creatures, and our hierarchy of values isn't always straightforward. We have our stated, public facing values. Mine, for example, are to grow in wisdom, apply knowledge judiciously, and stature, while increasing my height isn't an option, I can accumulate resources to do good. And in favor with God, living according to the standards of a higher power, and humans treat those around me with dignity. But we also have hidden or shadow values that don't meet the public eye. We live by both. Our stated values can express what we truly want, but often merely express what we think we ought to want. For example, we might publicly even sincerely express how much we value teamwork, but then conflict arises when our desire for personal credit, a promotion, or leadership status undermines our outward team spirit. Explorers must face the fact that wanting to want something is not the same as genuinely wanting it or giving it priority over other, unacknowledged values. Exploration involves excavating our shadow values. Wanting personal credit, for example, because as a child, if you weren't the best, approval was withheld. This dynamic was the seed bed for a shadow value, get along with your schoolmates, but make sure you win. Obscured values are often the default setting that govern our choices, but because they are less socially acceptable and productive than our stated values, we try to keep them hidden. Shadow values may live in the shadow of our consciousness, but they are in relief in our behavior. Unearthing our shadow values and rooting out the cognitive dissonance caused by holding two conflicting values are essential in exploration. Shadow values emerge to protect us, but left unchecked they will choke our growth and the growth of those around us. They are like cancer cells and weeds. Both grow, but at the expense of healthy ecosystems. It's understandable that we want our less socially acceptable values to stay in the shadows. And yet what we avoid or even run away from is almost always the

richest raw material for meaningful growth. Know what your shadow values are. Understand what aspects of your personality feed them, or perhaps what may have happened early in your life that made these shadow values powerful to you. Then bring them out of the shadows. This both honors the experiences that brought them into existence and loosens their grip.

Whitney Johnson: New York Times columnist David Brooks expresses the paradoxes of value-oriented growth. "You have to give to receive. You have to surrender to something outside yourself to gain strength within yourself. You have to conquer your desire to get what you crave. Success leads to the greatest failure, which is pride. Failure leads to the greatest success, which is humility and learning. In order to fulfill yourself, you have to forget yourself. In order to find yourself, you have to lose yourself."

Whitney Johnson: Number seven, is this my why? Do I understand my why in life and do I understand why I would undertake this new S-curve of learning? Do these two whys intertwine?

Whitney Johnson: In 1980, John Mackey co-founded Whole Foods Market, the future organic food giant began life as a small health food store, Safer Way, in Mackey's hometown of Austin, Texas. By 2000, Whole Foods had grown into the undisputed leader in the healthier foods market. At the same time, retail had begun its unstoppable march to the internet. Whole Foods had to keep step. The organization purchased a mail order vitamin business based in Boulder, Colorado, with the intent of making it the foundation for our own e-commerce outreach, Mackey says. He and his wife moved to Colorado to lay the groundwork for that initiative. Returning to Austin a year later, Mackey was shocked to discover the senior executive left in charge during Mackey's hiatus wanted him ousted, as did some of his board members. He was the only CEO the company had ever had. Now the board was meeting to decide whether his tenure was over. He recalls, "I was anxious about the meeting because I didn't know what the outcome was going to be, but I got into the stores and I don't know how else to put it, except I had a spiritual experience. I realized that my higher purpose was to be doing Whole Foods. It wasn't time for me to leave." That epiphany was a why moment. When Mackey realized that Whole Foods was more than a job. It was a purpose. Mackey survived the board meeting. He is still the company's one and only CEO now 40 years on. But the near miss with getting fired changed his perspective. From that moment, Mackey's goal became to be a more loving and conscious leader. A few years after surviving that scare, he announced in a companywide letter that he was cutting his annual salary to a dollar and giving his stock portfolio to charity. "I've reached a place in my life at which I no longer want to work for money, but simply for the joy of the work itself and to better answer the call to service that I feel so clearly in my heart." Mackey later capped Whole Foods executive salaries, set up an emergency fund for employees in need, and started funding nonprofit organizations working to promote animal welfare, sustainable agriculture, and healthier food choices. Being true to your why results in growth, you are conscious of your life's purpose. You're focusing your time and effort in areas that further your purpose. And when you grow yourself, you can grow your people. When Mackey focused on growing himself, his people grew and so did his company. In 2000, the company's stock traded at five dollars in twenty seventeen. It was forty-two dollars, and the retail juggernaut Amazon was preparing to buy Whole Foods for more than \$13 billion. John Mackey is a textbook example of a why in action, even if he was forced to explore that, why in a critical, stressful, and compressed moment.

Whitney Johnson: When contemplating a new opportunity for growth, consider what motivates you, the why behind what you're doing. As 20th century American novelist, poet, essayist, and environmental activist Wendell Berry put it, "The world is full of places. Why is it that I am here?" Exploring my way helped me recognize that I wouldn't stay in the investing business forever. It was a challenging revelation. I was good at picking stocks. I could build a decent financial model. I liked being able to say I was an investor. It made me feel important. This was my identity. But I didn't find myself thinking about the market when I didn't have to. I was far more excited by investing in people. For example, in 2002, while still an equity analyst, I read Tom Peter's article, *The Brand Called You*, published five years earlier. American Idol was also beginning to peak in popularity. I decided to start one of our team training meetings by talking about how American Idol contestants each had a brand. The diva, the comeback kid, the oddball. I then asked every analyst to think about their own personal brand. Were they a stock picker and industry expert? A connector? I loved preparing that presentation. I spent every spare minute thinking about these ideas and their implications for my colleagues. And I wasn't being paid to do it. Not really. Five years later, I was investing alongside Clayton Christensen, subconsciously transitioning to what I do now. During a conversation with U.N. Foundation communications director Kwa-Zulu Weinger, she said, "You don't just invest in stocks. You invest in people and their dreams." Bingo. My why. This sounds punchy, but it goes to my deeper purpose. When I interact

with you. I want to be invested in you. For you to have a greater sense of who you are and who you can be, not just professionally but personally as a human being.

Whitney Johnson: If you don't yet know your why, Simon Sinek provides a brilliant exercise. Ask the people who know you well, why they enjoy being around you and what their relationship with you does for them. If you can get candid, straightforward answers from them, their answers will reveal to you your why.

Whitney Johnson: Choosing your tide. With the S-curve of learning, you have a map, a visual representation of where you are in your growth, where you're going and how to get started. You don't yet know if you will stay on this particular S-curve. There are so many possible choices to explore, but you do know that you are choosing to grow. Whether you are a seasoned explorer in search of a destination or you already have a clear sense that this is the S-curve for me, still take the time to explore. The 19th century English writer Samuel Johnson said, "The use of traveling is to regulate imagination by reality instead of thinking about how things may be to see them as they are." Exploration, like travel, helps us to regulate our dreams and aspirations, making achievement more likely while protecting us against running off the rails with uninformed enthusiasm. Thorough exploration of a potential S-curve will help sustain you if your resolve falters along the curve. It gets you to the final and crucial set of explorer questions. Why not this S-curve? Why not me? Why not now? I make this sound easy. It's not. Smart growth requires dedication, discipline, hard work, a host of things that challenge us and test our patience. We can become frustrated and we can fail. But the exploration process can help shield us against consequences that are more likely and less desirable when we're not thoughtful and deliberate.

Whitney Johnson: I know this from personal experience. I have enjoyed a measure of serendipity and good fortune in my life and career. I have also undertaken S-curves that seemed cursed, in part because I was not smart in my exploration of them. One of these was a decision to invest in a startup magazine more than a decade ago. It was a friend's dream, and I liked to invest in both dreams and friends. Her idea sounded promising to me, and I leaped to the launch point with abandon. In fact, the new magazine got a write up in the New York Times and within a few months had garnered more than 100000 subscribers. A resounding success. Not so fast. In my enthusiasm to jump on this curve, I had almost entirely failed to perform the due diligence, exploration, that smart growth requires and that I've advocated for in this chapter. Though heavily invested in the project financially, I had little authority. We hadn't articulated a business plan. We'll figure it out as we go. Or a process for making tough decisions. And there were many of them about strategic direction, budget, hiring, cover art, print runs, and more. We had not defined a path to profitability. There was frequent conflict with my partner and the friendship waned as cash became a concern. It died altogether when the business imploded. Not only did I lose a friend, I lost a crippling amount of money that left my family teetering on the brink of ruin. It took us several years to recover. Even worse, the episode put a great strain on my marriage. My husband has always been supportive and my most important truth teller. But in this case, I didn't loop him in until after I'd jumped in. It was a huge mistake because collecting resources, especially human resources in our ecosystem, is critical early preparation on the launch point. More on this in the next chapter. My husband saw some of the warning signs that I blithely overlooked in my enthusiasm in haste. Another friend that I invited to take a key role in the startup told me repeatedly, "You need to better articulate the business plan, especially the decision-making process." But I stubbornly refused to listen to her as well. In the aftermath, it took a while to heal my most important relationship.

Whitney Johnson: The significant and varied lessons I learned from this spectacular fiasco are a testament to what a colossal failure it was. It affected relationships and finances, my sense of self-worth and self-confidence. One of its longer-term results is this book S-curves are a climb and climbing has its perils. The goal of exploration is not to eliminate those risks. That would be too ambitious and probably impossible, but thorough exploration can help reduce the risks, and optimize opportunities for growth. Exploration is also crucial because although we can scale multiple S-curves at the same time, sometimes we must choose between curves. In 2015, I had to make such a choice. The S-Curve of thought leader had emerged as a possibility in 2012 when I published the Disrupt Yourself article in Harvard Business Review, that then turned into a book project. I was preparing for its launch. Speaking opportunities and demand for coaching were increasing. A business model was emerging. At the same time, I was working with Kay Kaplovitz and Amy Wildstein developing a fund to invest in women entrepreneurs. It was another launch point. We were iterating, trying to find the right model to overcome reluctant investment in women owned businesses. They were savvy partners. I liked working with them, but it was becoming apparent that I needed to make a choice. Option A, build a business around personal disruption. Option B, Invest with Kaplovitz and

Wildstein. In retrospect, it wasn't that I couldn't do both. But given the intense involvement each required, it was imprudent to be on the launch point of these two particular curves at the same time.

Whitney Johnson: I remember a pivotal conversation with executive coach Phil Holberton during a crisp winter morning walk. Holberton told me that I would have to choose, I bristled. I knew he was right, but I didn't want to hear it. For nearly a year, I continued to try to chase both dreams. Finally, my truth-telling husband gently intervened. You need to make a choice. I listened. Kaplovitz And Wildstein's fund, Springboard Growth Capital has become successful investing in, among others, TheRealReal and Hint water. Their work is consistent with my why they are investing in people. In many ways, that partnership was a good fit. I still feel a little pang of sadness. The tide went out, a desirable ship sailed, and I wasn't aboard, but none of us can visit every attractive port of call. Once I decided to dedicate, rather than dilute my efforts, I started to gain traction on my chosen S-curve. In the coming months, I connected with Amy Humble, who would eventually become the president of Disruption Advisers. Together we are on the S-curve of learning to invest directly in people. This is the tide I have chosen.

Whitney Johnson: Explorer takeaways, this phase typically feels slow. The S-curve of learning is a powerful tool that helps you find your location in the growth process. It is a map with an X that says you are here. Much as a topographical map tells you what to expect on unfamiliar terrain. The S-curve of learning demystifies what steps you can take to reach your goals, the pinnacle of your S. The journey is filled with stages that mark your progress. No matter what speed you move through the explorer stage, it may take two weeks, it may take two years. This chapter will help you in this part of the growth cycle. The more you understand about exploration, the greater your capacity to explore.

Whitney Johnson: The first stage on the S-curve of learning is exploring. As an explorer, you're faced with the decision of choosing a new course. Exploring a new opportunity. Taking the first steps toward personal and professional growth isn't just a mental process, it's an emotional journey. Expect both positive feelings, the thrill of discovery, excitement from new options, and negative disorientation, anxiety, discouragement, impatience. You are exploring the unknown and dealing with uncertainty. There will be many questions you will be learning quickly, but it will feel slow. This is typical because it's so uncomfortable there could be a tendency to not even try or conversely to rush through this part of the growth cycle. But don't rush. This is the time to step back to grow and slow down to speed up. Meanwhile, life is a portfolio of often concurrent S-curves. But too many learning curves at a time can result in nothing completed, nothing mastered. Beware the rip tide of cumulative stresses. The most successful approaches to new S-curves are characterized by patience and perseverance. This stage in your smart growth comes with many questions that help you explore. Ask yourself the following questions Before committing to a particular S-curve, continue to ask them throughout your journey. And again, when you have completed it in order to detect patterns and make meaning for future endeavors. The explorer's key questions: Is it achievable? Is it something I believe I can achieve? Is it easy to test? Can I easily obtain useful feedback to inform my decision and progress? Is it familiar yet novel is the S-curve of learning I'm exploring familiar enough to be navigable yet novel enough to promote growth? Find the optimal ratio of tried and true to new. Does it fit my identity? Is this S-curve of learning compatible with my identity? Does it align with how I see myself and how others expect me to show up? Is the reward worth the cost? Are the incentives of this new learning curve sufficient to offset the tangible and emotional costs? Does it align with my values? Is this S-curve of learning harmonious with my core values? To what extent does it compete with my shadow values? Does it lead me in the direction of my deepest aspirations? Is this my why? Do I understand my why in life and do I understand why I would undertake this new S-curve of learning? Do these two whys intertwine?

Whitney Johnson: Not every puddle will support a Lily pad. Water needs to be deep enough, but not too deep. With sufficient sunlight and nutrients. Always be in search of a growth friendly pond where roots can form, and the shoots of a new S-curve curve can sprout. At the launch point of a new S-curve of learning, take time to explore and evaluate. Map your journey, find an opportunity with the right fit. Be bold in your questioning. Persevere. Be an explorer.