

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 273: FRANS JOHANSSON

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 now to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. This week's episode is about the magic that happens when we combine things, different people, different ideas, and different perspectives. In a word, diversity. We've talked about the importance of diversity a lot on this show, and today we'll get to build on it even further. Our guest is author, speaker, and consultant Frans Johansson, who's most well-known for his book *The Medici Effect*. As he'll share with you in a moment. The Medici family that controlled the politics of Italy in the 15th century was known for patronizing great artists, scientists, engineers and writers. The Medici's investment and diversity planted the seeds of the Renaissance, a time of extraordinary growth and enlightenment in Europe. Frans applies this to companies, families, governments, and any organization that can benefit from the alchemy of diversity. When different schools of thought intersect, great innovation is possible. And he's got the stories and the data to show it. This was a really fun conversation that I know you'll enjoy.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right. So, Frans, tell us about a formative experience.

**Frans Johansson:** For me, I think one of the most formative experiences I had was growing up the way I did in Sweden. My, my dad is Swedish. My mom was, she passed about a year ago, she was black and Cherokee. And so, this meant that I grew up at the intersection of race, of cultures, of countries. And although I didn't realize it that at the time, it really set in motion a whole foundation of looking at the world through intersectional perspective, bringing together differences. Because what happens when you do that? I saw that happening growing up. I saw that happening in how my parents would recombine ideas and norms from their various backgrounds, from the various cultures. And so, that set the stage for, I didn't realize at the time, but everything is going to follow in my life.

**Whitney Johnson:** Can you give us a specific example? You talked about your dad, your mom recombining. What's something very concrete that they did?

**Frans Johansson:** So, I, I give you one clear piece that stands out in my mind here. Okay. So, in the States, when we have pancakes, they're these sort of smaller, thicker type of things and we have them for breakfast. In Sweden, you have pancakes too, but they're more like crepes and you have them for either for dinner or as or after dinner. So, what did we do in my family? Well, we would have Swedish pancakes but for breakfast, and it blew my mind when, like, friends would come over. You're having pancakes for breakfast? I mean, now it's common because it's much more globalized. When I grew up, nobody did that. And that's an example, right? It's such a simple concept. But my parents found a way to recombine it into something different anew. And that's the type of stuff that would happen all the time.

**Whitney Johnson:** It's a great example and a nice lead-in to a book that you wrote now almost 20 years ago.

**Frans Johansson:** I know, it's crazy.

**Whitney Johnson:** 20 years ago titled *The Medici Effect*. Tell us the gist of this book. Give us a little bit of a history. I know some people are going to be familiar, but I think there are a lot of people that are not familiar with your work. So, so, give us a quick overview.

**Frans Johansson:** So, basically *The Medici Effect*, the basic idea is that we have the best shot of breaking new ground at the intersection of different disciplines, cultures, industries, fields, and so on, and perspectives. And so, it says that if we're able to make that connection between our different cultures and fields and industries, we are exponentially increasing the number of ideas we can come up with and the quality of those ideas. So, that's really the heart of it. It's called *The Medici Effect* because of the Medici family who ruled the city of Florence some 500 years ago. And they, you know, they sponsored creative people from a lot of different disciplines, like architects, and sculptors, and philosophers. Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. But when they did that, when they brought them to Florence, attracted them to Florence, they were able to themselves to recombine concepts and ideas to create the Renaissance. That's how we came to know the Renaissance. That's how we came to know what it meant to be a Renaissance person, somebody that was able to tap into a lot of different perspectives to create new ideas. So, *The Medici Effect* is about the effect that the Medici family created and how we can create that same effect ourselves.

**Whitney Johnson:** Do you remember when you discovered the Medici's?

**Frans Johansson:** When I wrote the book, I had another title entirely in mind, and I simply made a brief mention of the Medici family in the book. But once it came publishing time, my publisher, HBS Press, they were like, We don't like your title and we want another one. So, I had to try to figure out something that made sense. And, and I realized that this whole book had been about this effect. And so, I went back, I rewrote the book a bit, adding in somewhat context around the Medici family. And so, that was when I really, I mean, obviously, I'd heard about it. I don't I don't remember what I heard about them the first time, but that's when I really got to understand and go in-depth. And I will tell you, one of the greatest experiences I've had as a speaker was when I gave a talk in Florence. The city invited me, and I gave a talk right next to Michelangelo's David statue. They only allowed that to happen a couple of times in history. And then they sort of, we went, and we went on a tour throughout the whole city around with the Medici's had done and all their secret tunnels and chambers and so on. It was really an amazing experience to sort of feel, get a feeling for the history that they had in that city, but also in Europe overall. They really, really influenced a lot of a lot of what happened in Europe during that era for about 100 years or so.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, they invited you to come give that talk right next to that statue?

**Frans Johansson:** Yeah, it was, it was, it was fascinating.

**Whitney Johnson:** Hearing you say that it actually brought tears to my eyes. It was so powerful.

**Frans Johansson:** It really was. It was you; you're talking about because what I was talking about was innovation as it happens today. But being able to draw from principles of innovation is what I think of first principles that has always

held true. It's always held true. I just simply chose the Renaissance and the Medici's, because it is something that is fairly evocative. I mean, we have an understanding of it. We know who Leonardo da Vinci is. We have a sense of who Michelangelo was. But these are first principles. This is, this is true thousands of years before them. But giving that talk there I was feeling the wings of history when I was giving that talk about the future.

**Whitney Johnson:** Well, it's interesting. Standing next to the David statue, because there's a person that both you and I admire deeply, who talked a lot about David and Goliath, meeting in disruptive innovation. And Clay Christensen, who was my mentor and one of yours said this about *The Medici Effect*. He said, "And it's one of the most insightful books about managing innovation I have ever read." Do you have a memory of Clay that you would like to share?

**Frans Johansson:** So, I'm getting a bit emotional. Very influential for a lot of people. Definitely me. And I'll tell you, the reason I quote has meaning to me is because when I wrote *The Medici Effect*, I did so from a perspective of I was somebody had started a, a tech company, a dot com, which didn't make it. It kind of when everything crashed, I ultimately had to shut that down. And I still hadn't, technically. You know, I.

**Whitney Johnson:** Can we pause for just a second?

**Frans Johansson:** Yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** I'm glad that you had to shut that company down because you wrote this book you may not have otherwise.

**Frans Johansson:** I feel that way now at the time. You know, it wasn't it wasn't feeling all that great. But it wasn't like, it wasn't like I was some famous CEO. I wasn't Jack Welch talking about my experience of innovating. And I certainly, I didn't have a Ph.D. I wasn't teaching in a business school. So, I had this idea and I just really researched it and I worked it. And then when I wrote the manuscript, somebody asked me "What would success look like for you?" And I said the following. I said, listen, if somebody in the field of innovation that I respect feels that it made a contribution, then that would be success for me. And so, the first person I sent it to was Clay. I said, Here's the manuscript. If you want to blurb it, I would be excited, but I just want to get your take on it. And, you know, a couple of days later I get this email and that's what he said. And I just got tears in my eyes because that was somebody that I respected. And he felt like I made a contribution, and I had a chance to then meet him, you know, a couple of weeks later. And, you know, I know that it had a big impact on how he thought about the work that he was doing. It showed up in, in other books that he that, he talked about.

**Whitney Johnson:** I'd like to do a slightly deeper dive on how this applies to innovation. And one story that I would love for you to tell and and is about Marcus Samuelsson. And part of the reason I would like you to tell that story, it's not only because it's a great story, but I think that the last time I saw you in person, we had dinner in possibly one of his restaurants. Maybe it wasn't, but I think it may have been. And I remember at that dinner, this is the first and probably last time that this has happened to me, we were so boisterous, and we weren't even drinking. We were so boisterous, that someone came over and said, You two are having such a good time. And so, I would love for you just to tell this story about just a little bit about these ideas and how they were manifest in the story of Marcus Samuelsson.

**Frans Johansson:** I give a little bit of context here because this came to me when I wrote the book. This is not one of these things that I've discovered since. Obviously, we know that there's now thousands of examples of how diversity has driven innovation. But what I really was looking for was a way to have people easily understand what I meant by the recombination of ideas. And so, I was looking for ways to tell that story. And it struck me at one point that food. Everyone eats and that could be a vehicle. Now, Marcus is, has a background not completely dissimilar to mine. He grew up in Sweden. He's Swedish, but he was adopted from Ethiopia. So, he grew up in a, in a very homogeneous country, just like myself, but different. And I think that influenced that. He saw the world as well in a similar way. So, he had an opportunity to learn how to cook in lots of different countries around the world. On a cruise ship that took him to even more places around the world. And when he was ready to start sort of bringing all these sensations and tastes and ingredients and do something with it first, he tried to do it actually in France, in Paris, and they wouldn't have him. They were like, I mean, this will tell you, pretty much, pretty much stated, look, we can't have

somebody who looks like you. In other words, black in this restaurant. It's like, where do I need to go next? Oh, New York, in New York, it will be easier turned out to be true.

**Frans Johansson:** He comes to New York, and he starts to really innovate what we think of as Swedish food and Swedish food up until Marcus was a, had a fairly limited sort of variability. I mean, those of you that are seeing and listening to this, you know, meatballs, clearly that's the that's a key, salmon. There's a couple of things that make up Swedish food. And he used us as a base, as a, as a foundation. But then he kept on reinventing, recombining, creating new dishes, new ingredients, new cooking techniques. Through that, he was able to become, he became the youngest chef, at the time, to receive the three-star ratings for his food from The New York Times. That really put him on the map. And today, if you're a foodie, you will see him everywhere. I mean, so he has, he has innovated actually, not just food, because at some point he said, you know, I want to, I want to go to innovating our relationship to food. You really wanted to change. The people in New York felt about Harlem, who's been part of this new sort of Harlem renaissance. And so, this is the way he's approached it. And it's a, it's a wonderful example of The Medici Effect of bringing together ideas, concepts, from different cultures. And, of course, today we know that we think of it as fusion food, and it's a much more established concept. But when, when he was doing it, we were really, really on the very early stages of, of, of that as a movement.

**Whitney Johnson:** I would suspect this is fun for you where you were writing about him nearly 20 years ago and he was just starting to, to move. And so, for you to watch The Medici Effect become this cultural phenomenon, to watch his career burgeon and become an icon in the food industry, that must be a fun thing to observe.

**Frans Johansson:** It's been fantastic. I mean, we have been, we became friends. And we've been, we've partnered up in a lot of different things throughout the years. So, it's been exciting for both of us to see how our careers have really evolved out of what is a similar foundational concept. The, this notion of stepping into intersection, this notion of being open to. Not just open to aggressively hunting for diversity, being inclusive of that diversity. So, these are elements that that has been a hallmark of his career. But in the same for mine, you're right. When, when I wrote the book, he was in the very beginning of this stage and, and, you know. Well, obviously so was I. So, it's been, it's been a journey for both of us.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, well, you just actually said something now that I think takes us where I would like to go next, which I thought was very interesting. And in reading your work is this idea of DNI diversity and inclusion, and you have this opening story where you say this executive, and I think it was at Nike, staked her career on the idea of *The Medici Effect* helping inform diversity inclusion. Can you talk about that and the work that your, your organization is doing with organizations around this and how and bring that all together?

**Frans Johansson:** So, you know, this is, this is actually a remarkable story. So, I write this book and when I'm writing it, I'm talking about diversity. And in its broadest sense, you know what happens when you combine termites and architecture, but also what happens when we combine ideas from different cultures, people from different backgrounds. So, it's sort of a very, very inclusive, and broad definition of diversity. But now, now how does it translate into, into the corporate world? Because that's where this started getting traction. And here my, well, at the time she was my girlfriend and fiancé, now she's my wife and co-founder. But she was working in the world of DNI and on Wall Street, and she'd been given a very particular task, which was to find the business case for diversity. Now, mind you, this is in 2004. So, this is a fairly new thing. And as she started to look into things, she said, you know, honestly, Frans. I think your book is kind of it. So, I was just like really? I mean, makes sense, I guess. And that opened up a completely new world because what really happened was that there was a beginning need. It was at that time, it was early. You saw some companies really focus in on this, but they wanted to make progress around DNI. But if they could, they would like to tie it to innovation, to creativity, to business. And at that stage, Nike reached out. And actually, the two first companies to do this that reached out, very seriously wanted to lean in on using DNI, not for its own sake, but as a driver of their creativity.

**Frans Johansson:** It was Nike and Disney. And, and we can see it today. I mean, those two companies have for years spent way out of their competitors when it comes to thinking about how this plays a role in their branding and their products and the talent in the organization and everything else in their stories, in their movies. So, Nike reached out and it was the chief diversity officer who reported to the CEO at the time, and she said, Frans, I'd like you to come in and talk to my leadership about this. I want them to see the connection. I want them to think about the reason

they should be doing this is because this will help us address design, it helps us address products, and she. I was in Paris doing something else. I said, I can only make it there during this time. She said, I'll move the entire leadership meeting just to make sure that you can meet them. I flew in, and she just started. It was really a; I have to say it was a fairly courageous move on her part. And the CEO opens to say, look, our new chief diversity officer staked her career on this next speaker. I'm like, oh, okay. And I went in and it really, it really made a difference. It changed how Nike thought about the value of diversity, inclusion as a driver of innovation, as a driver of design, and as a driver of creativity.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, now, 18 years after you've written this book, it's become even more relevant than it was 18 years ago.

**Frans Johansson:** Oh, my God. I mean, you know, as you know, two years ago after George Floyd this. It always been on the rise, but this now it exploded not just in the United States, all over the world. And what we found was this. This is the first time I have seen a hunger across the board B2C, B2B companies, not just to wanting to address issues around diversity and inclusion, but to tie it to the business. Because here's the piece that I struggled with. Most of the efforts that have been going on up until that point and it still is going on in many organizations, that is that they were asking leaders to optimize against two things at once. Hey, you need to optimize against performance, and you need to optimize against DNI. But I mean, it's hard enough just to optimize against one thing. I mean, just optimizing against performance is hard enough. So, if you're asking people to choose, I mean, if, if this ever comes into a perceived conflict, then what are you going to do? You're going to go for performance every day of the week. What I've been helping organizations to do and leaders to do is to understand how they can use DNI to enhance performance. And so, now you still only optimize against one thing performance. And this is another tool. It's another tactics, another strategy. However, whatever helps you sort of to, to make sense of it, to help you drive performance. And that is the key difference over the past two years that interest has skyrocketed. But now we're looking is there a way to help us drive performance? And that has made this much stickier. Companies are really much more serious about it than I've ever seen in history.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, my husband's a biologist by training, and so, he'll talk about like diversity is what drives evolution. Without diversity, you don't survive. And so, I found that very interesting and that certainly makes a compelling case for it. If you want to survive, you better diversify. But I in my mind, I typically would think of, and I bet a lot of people do, is they think, well, if you've got diversity, you are able to come up with more ideas. And I thought it was very interesting that you made the point that if you have diversity, you are more likely to be able to execute against those ideas. Because when you get stuck and from a network perspective, you've got more pathways to get unstuck. Is there, is there an example that comes to mind or something you'd like to share about that?

**Frans Johansson:** Thank you for honing in on this piece. I think this is an absolutely critical piece and it's often missed when we talk about innovation. For many people, not people that have listened to your podcasts over the, over the years, they will know this. But, but, you know, we tend to sometimes just think of innovation as ideation. Like, like these things get sort of connected. Well, that's, you know, one piece around it. It's the execution, it's the biggest piece. But if we really want to think about how we execute innovative ideas, it's really a, a loop between idea, execution, idea, execution. As we execute, we get to think of new ideas, and then we have to execute those. So, these things are kind of going in a loop. So, the faster you're iterating, right, the, the faster the pace of innovation. So, that's sort of a baseline understanding of how to think about that. Now, what are some terms that people use to describe this phenomenon? We, we pivot maybe, if we went from one iteration to the next, or we run experiments and tests that we can think of as bets. And that also helps us to get into this loop. But in an organizational context, what is the reality of how this thing plays out? Well, here's what tends to happen. Let's say that let's say that you have a homogeneous team and they come up with an idea and they think about how should we make it happen? And they land pretty quickly on how they should make it happen.

**Frans Johansson:** We know the exact right person to talk to. Who? Oh, it's Paul. Okay, you go to Paul. But Paul was busy. He has other stuff to do right now. So, Paul says, Listen, come back to me in a couple of weeks, okay? But what did we find with diverse teams? And, and when I say we find we work with thousands and thousands of teams all over the world. So, we have the data. A diverse team, if they go to so, let's say they go to Paul. Paul's busy. Now, this diverse team simply has a much larger surface area of connections and networks inside the organization or outside of it that they will not be just for them. That's okay. That's fine. You're busy. Well, can we go to Alicia?

Alicia might be able to help us make this sort of next move, this next bet, this next experiment. And if we run into trouble there, we may have another pathway. So, think of it as a, a team that now has just always more options available to them to move their idea forward. And so, where do I, where do I see examples of this? It's in the, I don't know if I have a spectacular example to share. It is more in the mundane of everyday experience of innovation happens because this is about the execution. It's not big and spectacular. It's in the almost like behind the scenes of how ideas get done.

**Whitney Johnson:** I have a practical example for you from my own career. And are you familiar with Boris Groysberg's research at all? Do you know Boris?

**Frans Johansson:** I do not.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, HBS Professor, and he wrote a lot about Wall Street equity analysts, and he found he did research. And this has probably been 15, maybe 20 years ago now about star analysts. And he had this initial research about how star analysts were not able to move from one firm to another. And he had a lot of pushback from that because what he found is, is that star analysts who were men were not able to move from one Wall Street firm to another, but women were, in fact, able to do it. Why? Because when they, they were successful because they had a really strong network internal to the organization, all the traditional expected pathways worked for them. But for the female analysts, because they weren't able to get their power from inside the organization, they had built this infrastructure from outside of the organization that sustained them so, that they could move. And this happened for me. I did exactly this thing. I moved from one firm to another, and I was able to maintain my ranking because my, my network was outside the organization.

**Frans Johansson:** So, that's a terrific example. And you're reminding me of how exactly this is a very common path that we see for teams inside of companies if that team has gender diversity, just to pick one dimension. But it holds true across lots of different dimensions of diversity. But just to pick up on your story, it turns out that the women of that team tend to build very different networks from the men. And those networks are different in different ways too, because there's a few different. It's just a requirement to get to where they were in a, in a corporate, in a corporate context. The guys on the team kind of had a pathway already established and they had more similarities in how they built those things. So, now a team that had all guys and so, we would literally see this, right? You would see a team that some teams that had all, all men on them and teams that had diversity in terms of gender. So, you could run a real controlled experiment if you will live and you would be able to see over and over and over again that this team, the more diverse team, simply had more pathways. And you add on dimensions of diversity, and you see those pathways proliferate.

**Whitney Johnson:** If you want to find people who are more inclined to bring the Medici. So, Medicians is probably not a word into your organization, are there any tell? So, for example, so, if you're talking to someone and you say, hey so-and-so, tell me your story. Are you able to buy someone telling you their story start to qualitatively pick up on and say, you know, this person is probably more inclined to be a Medician? Are you able to say, oh, this person can get out of their lane, this person can go into the intersection? Are there any tells that you look for?

**Frans Johansson:** They evolve, I will say, because, you know, the, the world itself is, is evolving. And what we do has evolved. But here's a couple of bigger points. Let me see if I can try to identify a few things that are maybe unexpected, because some of these things you would have heard before, openness to new ideas, like you can sort of tease that out. But here's what interests me. Why did you make the decisions you made as you evolved through your career? What was, what was going on? And people that are more open to this way are, one, a bit more open to serendipity. So, they're more open to the fact that maybe they have spent a lot of time planning on things. I'm not saying that that removes the planning, but they're open for the fact that the planning part can't solve all of it. And so, something unexpected might happen. And they, they, they willing to pay attention, attuned to that a bit more than others. Like, yeah, here's something I'm going to listen to that even though I can't necessarily fully explain why I think this has a value I, something tells me that he does, and I want to go in that direction. So, that's one piece.

**Frans Johansson:** The second one is that you see them being able to defacto have access to diversity along a few different dimensions. We define it along four dimensions. Who you are, what you do, how you do it, and with whom you do it? So, in other words, it's the. It's this idea that they've been able to take a, could be an abstract notion

of diversity and that they like it and have translated that into real life in some in some way. This could show up in their careers, the choices they made in their careers. It can show up in how they who they have been connected with. It can show up in where they were in the world. But in order to understand all of that, one has to understand how the career evolved. What were the choices and pathways you made? So, that to me is a very interesting question that reveals a lot in this context.

**Whitney Johnson:** Is there, does anything come to mind? Any story come to mind?

**Frans Johansson:** It's a great example from Italy, a trip that I did in Italy. We met a person there and this person described their trip to Italy. And they'd been to, I think, ten different places throughout, throughout the country in a matter of two weeks or something like that. And what he said was, you know, I forget where I've been once, I get home because I'm going to look at my pictures. Now, when then we started getting into what the choices were, etc. But what I realized was that. There was no ability for this person to draw any inference or any additional insight from where they've been. In other words, it's not enough to have had a broad career or it's not enough to have been to three different countries. What you're really looking for is somebody that is actively seeking to make use of those differences, leaning in on them and saying, Ah, you know, I if I, if I went to Portugal, this is how it helped influence this part of my work or this hobby or something. But they are actively looking to make connections, actively looking to, to, to, to recombine going back to that term again, recombine these ideas. That's what we're talking about. And so, it could show up differently. Somebody can share a recipe. You can think, wow, this person really steps into it. But once you hear their life story, you realize that, well, they had no choice. They just did this and this and this and this because, well, one thing just led to another. And there was they'd never really pulled the threads together. I'm looking for people that are actively looking to make those connections.

**Whitney Johnson:** One of the things I'm hearing you say is that you can, you can say, I've been to ten countries and gotten absolutely nothing out of it. And you can also, that can also mean that a person can never have traveled anywhere.

**Frans Johansson:** But still be a Medician. So, so, this is exactly right because. And in fact, I mean, you know, you think about this from an equity perspective, that is entirely how we have to think about it. Somebody might still be able to look in their, in their close community. How are they thinking about getting information online? If we just focus only on that, if we follow the algorithms that are guiding us, they would actually like us less and less likely to experience diversity. So, when I'm, when I'm talking to people, I'm looking for them to show me those connections, actively pursuing them. And again, today, we are goaded into actually try to minimize the diversity around us because that's what the algos are, are encouraging us to do in order to, for us to become more predictive.

**Whitney Johnson:** One of the things I talk about is the fact that an S Curve worth doing needs to be. And I draw on the Brian Uzi research and I want to talk about that in just a second. Is that it needs to be 85-95% familiar and 5-15% new in order to be navigable. And as I was drawing on that research, I was seeing that it was published in 2014. And I was wondering, was he influenced by your research at all?

**Frans Johansson:** I don't know. But, but, but, you know, it certainly seems to be a, a usable inference, right? Yeah. Yeah. So, maybe. Yeah, maybe.

**Whitney Johnson:** Which means then, Frans, I actually literally as I was preparing for this podcast, I thought I actually need to go back to my editor at Harvard Business Press and in my next printing include an acknowledgment that I was influenced by your thinking, because I'm realizing, and I'll tell you why now. In my book, I made a very, very, very conscious effort to have 85-95% of my sources and my stories, to be from the usual suspects. And 5-15% that were not so, that you would get those intersections that would make the book interesting and engaging. So, I wanted to share that with you, and I don't know if you have any quick thoughts on that, but it's an observation.

**Frans Johansson:** I have one thought, was just one, one thought around it, which is that what is interesting about that frame is that. My belief is that wherever you fall on this percentage, right, whatever it is, it is probably increasing year over year. And the reason I'm saying that is people are simply more open today to something that is more new because it is being thrust upon them whether they want it or not. And that is giving us a heuristic intuition, a way of

living that opens ourselves up to that. So, I think that that percentage point can be creeping up over time. We will see it being able to creep up over time.

**Whitney Johnson:** The connection I'm making is thinking about psychologists have found that periods of severe stress, like a pandemic, lead to tremendous growth, and they call it post-traumatic growth. And so as I'm listening to you talk and is this idea of if we are going from we're comfortable with 5-15% novelty to 20% novelty or 25% novelty, and the intersections are where the growth happens. Then those are all contributing factors to our being in this period of growth, which is so exciting.

**Frans Johansson:** It's really amazing. I mean, it is an amazing period of growth. And I don't. For better or worse, I don't see it stopping. It can't because people are connected. They have ideas. They're building on each other. There's new technologies and new norms, new cultures. All of these things are working together to open really the floodgates. More floodgates. We already open them. There's more. There's more floods and more gates. So, so, so, this is really the world we're living in now.

**Whitney Johnson:** You yourself, have you've had this, this body of work, this intellectual property, and you've built a consulting firm over the past 20 years. But I understand that you've been jumping to a new S Curve in terms of your business model. Would you share with us what you've been doing?

**Frans Johansson:** So, I mean, this is straight out of your, straight out of your playbook, disrupting yourself. I mean, the short of it is that we have transformed from a consulting firm to a SAS platform company. And what is it that, what is it that we are doing now as a company? Well, as a consulting firm, we helped organizations change. And we did that by having a, an approach, a framework around how to use diversity and inclusion to drive innovation and, and business performance more generally. But I always felt that the tools that were accessible to drive that change, they hadn't changed much at all. I mean, these are workshops, there's, there's coaching. There are frameworks that no one really reads. They're not really used much after the introduction. People don't go back to it like years later. I mean, I'm not talking about maybe like if you're an SVP, perhaps, but most people are just basically trying to get through the day and the propagation of it, right? You start at the top, let's get everybody on board at the leadership. Then we go to the next level, then to the next level. That's, I mean, by the time you get down to sort of the base of this pyramid, Lisa has moved on a long time ago, if you make it there. Right. I mean, most of these projects kind of fall apart as you, as you propagate. It just felt very broken. It felt like this is not, this is not really using all the tools and technology that we have access to.

**Frans Johansson:** So, what is Renaissance? Renaissance is a way of changing an entire division or an entire organization in three months. We're very particular, where we take thought leadership. It has been focused on mine for now, but ultimately going to open up for, for everything else. And we convert it into what we call moves, a very defined action, a very defined set of behaviors that works globally, that's been tested globally, very simple instructions, maybe two steps, the three steps, max four. And you spend 5 minutes learning that and then three months adopting it. So, it's really not a lot. But if everybody's doing or a lot in a large percentage of a division is doing it. You see an instant impact in performance. And I'll give you an example. One might be share information sooner than you're comfortable with. Mm hmm. Share. Share sooner is what we call it. Super powerful, really hard to do. But if you can get people to understand how to do it, then you have something. And we find it to be a complete game-changer for organizations. And it's kind of like it goes into this habit idea. Like it's very easy to learn how to floss your teeth, but. But that doesn't mean that you do it. But if you did, it would have an impact. Mm hmm. That at an organizational level. So, the, so the Renaissance, which is what we call the product, is the ability to sort of hit a whole division out at one time and then get them to sort of adopt this move.

**Whitney Johnson:** Around, around a specific behavior.

**Frans Johansson:** Around a specific behavior. And then once those two months are up, the next move gets introduced, and you kind of just work your way through it. And that's the case we also found really work.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, as you think about jumping to this new S Curve, what's been a challenge of moving from, from being a consulting firm to a SAS-based company? Just share one of them with, with us from an identity perspective, what has been the challenge?



**Frans Johansson:** The biggest challenge has been as a consulting firm; you are very attentive and listening to what each individual customer wants. What does, what does Disney want or Nike or Pfizer, or you're trying to really grasp that deeply, and then you're kind of tailoring it in, to something. That doesn't mean that you have, you have your own, you have your frameworks, and so on, but you're really trying to make it work exactly for that organization. And that creates an entire mindset. Of your own company, your own talent, being geared towards that. A platform is very different. If you had to do that with every single customer. That well, it wouldn't be a platform, it would be something else. So, now you have to start becoming very reductionist. What is it that you can do that would work across the board? How do you know that it works across the board? And then the customization is a really modular solution. Right. So, you're trying to say, well, I mean, Pfizer might be different from Disney, but it's different in the same way that Johnson and Johnson is different, or AstraZeneca is different because they're pharma companies. And so, there's a module here that sort of can address that. So, it's just the productization is through the roof and it requires a completely different mindset than from a consulting firm. And going through that has been it's challenging. It's all the challenges that you would predict out of Clay's work, your own work. You know, you are entrenched. You've built this value network around one way of doing something and you kind of have to break that.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, I will go in and I will personally solve this problem for you, very bespoke. And that's my identity, is I'm a solver, I'm a fixer. And now you've got to turn your, your ideas and your mindset in sort of almost inward to helping your people figure out how to build a platform that can solve the problem at scale. And that requires you don't get that stroke that comes with having that individual conversation.

**Frans Johansson:** That's it. And so, culturally identity-wise, that's a, that's a huge difference. It's been very exciting. But yeah, it's, it's challenging.

**Whitney Johnson:** I'm reading Brené Brown's book right now. And speaking of having hunches about how things might be connected, I came across a quote that I want to read and just have you respond to it. She says, "True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are. It requires you to be who you are." What are your thoughts?

**Frans Johansson:** If I were to tie it to the conversation that we've had here; diversity only means something if people can stay true to who they are. Because if they don't, they will actually automatically start to gravitate towards each other. They will start shedding those things of themselves that make them different. And so, belonging is critical. It's critical in life. You want to feel like you belong. It's critical in an organizational context, too, because if you want to tap into the diversity and if people don't feel that they can belong of who they are, what you're going to find is that that diversity evaporates. It constricts. It's like a compresses, like a neutron star, like a black hole, boom. And now we're kind of similar to each other. There are some aspects that may be helpful from a culture perspective, right? You have values. They want people to adhere to those values. I'm not saying that there's some benefits of getting people on the same page or on something, but really today the biggest benefit is difference that people bring. Belonging is the ability to keep that difference alive, because I can stay true to who I am. Outside of work. And at work. And so, that's how I would take that quote to mean.

**Whitney Johnson:** It's beautiful for people who are listening, Frans, and are thinking, I want to develop this muscle. Is there one practice that you say, start there, super simple, but start there?

**Frans Johansson:** I mentioned one of our moves. It's called Hidden Heroes, and it goes something like this. Ask yourself. Write down when you think of doing something new or how to solve a problem. Write down who are the usual suspects that you would go to write that list. And then don't then pick somebody that's not on the list. Very, very simple, basic heuristic. But it forces diversity. It forces you to reach out of whatever that established network is and not necessarily even mean names. It can mean that I usually go to designers for this. I usually go to chemists for this. I usually go to my, you know, my colleagues for this, say, you write that. And I used to go to my colleagues for this. Mm hmm. Well, now you can't pick one of your colleagues, so, automatically it, it forces you to start thinking about who else could you reach out to? And those heroes basically are hidden to you until you uncover them in this

way. And so, it's a move that is very powerful, but it's one of the fastest ways of experiencing the, this, this notion of what the intersection is and what the Medici Effect is.

**Whitney Johnson:** You set this at the beginning, and you say it in your book is that the intersection is the low-risk probability of breaking new ground. And I think, as you said in part when you're in the intersection, you've got a multiplicity of options. It's a multiplier versus an addition and subtraction. And so, it's just really interesting to me, there's a wonderful paradox here because the intersection feels very frightening because you're standing in this place where there's a lot of ideas and pieces that feel unknown. So, you're basically at the launch point of a new S Curve, but in fact, that willingness to be there lowers the risk of doing something new.

**Frans Johansson:** We like to think of innovation, and we put in a cast in terms of taking risks. We've got to take chances, we have to push ourselves, and I guess it's appropriate to have that. But what you're talking about here is to me the more helpful model, because if our desire is to change, if our desire is to innovate, then we have to ask ourselves, what's the probability of success given what we're doing now to do that? And in my mind. You are removing the risks of failure if you put yourself in the intersection. It just may not appear that way, but that's really the frame that I think is helpful here.

**Whitney Johnson:** I think it's really powerful. Really, really helpful. What connections have you made today as we've been talking? Any ideas or thoughts that you've had? It may be something you said, maybe something I said, maybe just something that you thought. But what bubbled up for you?

**Frans Johansson:** Well, I'll tell you something that, that I've really enjoyed in this conversation. And you took some time to go back to the roots of the journey of how I got here. And I mean, that was conversations that I would have maybe back when the book came out. But since then, it's been about other stuff. It was just really enjoyable to do that. It made me think about those early stages of the journey and, and the discoveries insights that I had. And that is true for any new, any new journey. Like when you jump in another S Curve, you sort of would expect to have that. So, so, to me, not only has it been enjoyable to revisit that together with you, but it's made me think about the dynamics that are at play in that sort of that early phase, and that there are lessons that I could bring back even to my own team and to other people beyond remembering what it was like, sort of starting on this journey. I thought it was great.

**Whitney Johnson:** So good. All right. Any final thoughts to put, to put a bow on this conversation.

**Frans Johansson:** I guess I would say that when I think about the arrow of history. I concept I've been thinking about it a lot lately. I think the arrow in history, that arrow is clear, is very, very clear. Throughout history, the world has become increasingly diverse and inclusive. I mean, there's no doubt about that. There are eddies, though. There are sort of temporary setbacks that occur. And so, it may feel like we're going in the opposite direction, but long term, that is where it's heading. And that is still true today. And that is the reason why we're having this conversation where we're doing it virtually because that arrow of history is what drives innovation. So, when I think about all the stuff that we talked about today, I just want to put it in the context of tens of thousands of years. This has been a trajectory that we've been on. It's just. Hyperspace now. So, everybody like, hold on. I don't think we've seen anything yet about innovation or about diversity and inclusion. It's going to be an amazing world.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, it's going to just keep getting better. Frans Johansson, thank you so much for being with us.

**Frans Johansson:** Thank you.

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Three key takeaways from my conversation with Frans. Number one, the innovation loop. As Frans says, we tend to think of innovation as ideation, but that's only one piece. It's actually the loop between building ideas, executing on them effectively, then learning from that execution to deliver the next idea that drives true innovation. In other words, iteration. Diversity increases your pool of ideas. But don't forget to execute on the ones that you know are right. That piece is called leadership.

Number two successful people are open to serendipity. This might feel counterintuitive leaving your career to chance seems like a bad idea, but Frans reminds us that we can't control everything. If you try, you will be closing doors to unexpected pathways. Success is not about control, but making the best choices when life throws us a curveball, which will happen whether we like it or not. Serendipity is an ingredient, not the whole recipe.

Number three. Seek diversity as a competitive advantage. We don't have to keep selling you on diversity. You're ready to make it happen. So, how do you build a team with a truly diverse set of experiences and backgrounds? Frans says, identify the person you would normally give an assignment to and give it to someone completely different. Allow your team to flex their skills and new dimensions. Maybe they'll approach the challenge in a completely new way. The surface area of a diverse network is much greater than traditional channels. Maybe it won't be a slam dunk every time, but over the long haul, you'll discover skills and processes that give you a huge competitive advantage, especially if you're in the knowledge or creative space.

If you want more on the intersection of unusual ideas, listen to Dr. Ulcca Joshi Hansen on her approach to education in [Episode 258](#) and Roger Martin in [Episode 194](#). And for more on routines and strategies to make thoughtful connections, listen to Brook Snow in [Episode 224](#). Thank you again to Frans Johansson for being our guest. Thank you for listening. Thank you to our producer, Matt Silverman, audio engineer and editor Whitney Jobe, and production assistant Stephanie Brummel.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.