

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 285: JASON FEIFER

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. Before we get started this week, I wanted to share a really important email I received from a listener named Jennifer. "Good morning, Whitney. I just wanted to say thank you for your 2020 Step Back to Grow podcast episode. I'm about to jump on a new S Curve with an early-stage startup that involves me letting go of a VP title and focusing more narrowly on marketing instead of going broad. I'm pursuing this despite being recruited for fancier roles with more money. Some people are telling me I shouldn't take a step back at this point in my career, and I've been wrestling with my own ego as well. Listening to your Step Back to Grow podcast episode on my morning run, I felt moved to tears by your deeply meaningful and insightful wisdom. Your work renews my confidence in the non-linear path to growth, steels my courage, and puts things in perspective on the long-term S Curve of life. Your work is incredible, and so are you. Thank you." Jennifer. Thank you. You have no idea. This is what this show is about. And I will note that Step Back to Grow is one of our most popular episodes of all time. I love what you wrote about the long-term S Curve of life. Sometimes that's difficult to see when we're making key decisions like which job to take, where to live, and who to form relationships with. But Jennifer is so right. Life is a nonlinear path to growth. And I'm so glad that our work here was a part of your decision. For everyone else, you can email me at any time at [wj@whitneyjohnson.com](mailto:wj@whitneyjohnson.com). I read and respond to every note I get, and we love to share some on the podcast when we can. This week, I had another extraordinary conversation with a guest named Jason Feifer, who is the editor-in-chief of *Entrepreneur* magazine. That's more than enough to

keep him busy. But Jason is also well known for his podcast and now his new book entitled *Build for Tomorrow*. His work revolves around something humans are generally pretty bad at dealing with. We struggle to deal with change, which of course, is part of the reason for this podcast. Jason looks back through history at new technologies, social norms, and creative trends that used to terrify us but today have become laughably commonplace. Musicians cursed phonograph records, elevators would tear apart our social fabric, and teddy bears threatened our very children's existence. There's a lot to be learned from moral panic around change, especially because we live in an era of rapid social and technological change. Jason tells us what we know. Deep down, change is inevitable. But his mission is to help people help us thrive in it. I guarantee this conversation will get you thinking differently about the future.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, Jason, will you share with us a formative experience?

**Jason Feifer:** My first job out of college was at this tiny little newspaper called *The Gardner News* circulation 6,000, back at the time, I don't know what it is now. Covering nothing, like nothing happening in this town. I literally, I wrote a series in which I just visited every diner in town and wrote about what was going on at the time. There's just nothing going on. And I had this vision of myself. It was it wasn't that well-formed. But I knew that I wanted to do big work. It's just how I, how I thought about I want to do big work. I want to write for lots of people. I want to reach lots of people or talk about interesting things. I just didn't know what that meant or looked like. And as a result, being at this tiny little newspaper in Massachusetts, I got sour, like, in a bad way. I think I was unpleasant to work with. I felt like this newspaper was punishing me for being there or I didn't belong there. I was too good for it. And I was, I was really broadcasting that. And then one day, my boss basically came and gave me an ultimatum, which was basically which was like, you either do the work that we're asking you to do or get out of here. Go away. And I realized a couple of things in that moment.

**Jason Feifer:** Number one, I felt like I was better than that place. But if I was better than that place, then I would have been somewhere else. Like I wasn't, right. And I learned that I need to have I'm an ambitious guy. I realized that early, and yet I was an ambitious guy that still had a lot to learn and didn't really have any connections. And it was probably going to take me a while to get where I wanted to go, and there was a lot that I needed to learn along the way. Like I wasn't good enough to be hired by the places that I wanted to work at. So, why don't I buckle down and do the work? But then two, I realized that, you know, working at this place, this tiny little newspaper. It was never going to get me where I wanted to go by itself. Because here I was showing up and writing about the local diners and dreaming of working at, like *The New York Times* or something. And never, never Whitney, was anybody at *The New York Times* ever going to drop me a line and be like, Kid, read that story about the local diner. We're bringing you up to the big time. Sending you straight to the White House to cover the president. It's just not going to happen. So, I needed to go to them.

**Jason Feifer:** Right. Like I need it to be humble about what I needed to learn, but I also needed to be proactive about actually pursuing the things. I think part of the reason why I was really frustrated is because I was sitting around hoping to be recognized, and nobody was recognizing me. So, I quit. I quit that newspaper after a year, and I lived in this dumpy apartment next to a graveyard in central Massachusetts. Rent was 500 bucks a month because I was splitting it with three friends, and I just cold pitched. I just, I just reached out to editors who I didn't know, and I cold pitched them all day long, and got almost no response. And I did this for nine months, and it was humbling, and it forced me to learn a lot. And eventually, one day, this editor from *The Washington Post* responded to a pitch

of mine and said she wanted to get on the phone and talk. And I was terrified. And I got on the phone, and I'm like, my mouth is dry. And I'm like pacing around this dumpy apartment, looking, looking outside at the graveyard. And she's asking me all these questions about the story and why am I qualified to write this story, right? Like, I'm not qualified to write. It was like fresh out of college. And my only experience was that I had written for this tiny newspaper.

**Jason Feifer:** But at the very end of this conversation, she said, her name was Susan Morris, Susan said. Well, I'm not ready to say yes, but I'm not going to say no. If you want to do more work on this and come back to me, then you're welcome to. And I thought, okay, this is it. Like this is the culmination of the right. It's like I needed to be humble and learn, but I also needed to go and prove myself. And now somebody has cracked the door open a small amount, and it's time to, like, put to the test everything that I have told myself I need to do. And so, I just went out and reported the just hell out of this story that I was pitching, which was the most random thing in the world. It was about, it was about distance sex therapy. This was this is back before video chat was a thing. And I came back to her like a couple of weeks later with, I don't know, I talked to like a dozen people. I'd written an outline of like 3,000 or 4,000 words, like way longer than the story was ever going to be. And she said, yes. And that's how I got my first ever clip. And that's how I proved to myself that I could do it and what it took.

**Whitney Johnson:** There's so much there. So, the first thing that comes to mind is that what you just said is, if I had been better, I wouldn't be there.

**Jason Feifer:** Yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** You said it better than I did.

**Jason Feifer:** You said, great.

**Whitney Johnson:** Do you remember how you felt when your boss said that to you?

**Jason Feifer:** I felt enraged when he told me to get out because. Because, you know, it's so funny. I think people if you lose a sense of what your value is, if you lose sight of what you actually have to offer people, you get this very warped perception. And I think that I at once was thinking, I am the best thing this newspaper's got going. But at the same time, this newspaper doesn't deserve me, and therefore I will not do the work. It was a kind of terribly entitled view of yourself, where you're taking up space and providing no value and expecting people to thank you for it. And it wasn't really until I was able to digest his threat that I realized he's right in that I don't really belong like I shouldn't be here. I'm not contributing anything. So, he's correct that I need to go. And the thing that he didn't say but that I kind of took was like, you're no good, right? You know, good, kid. Get the hell out of here. And I thought, well, I need to prove that wrong. Like, I am not being a good contributor to anything right now, but I have this vision of myself as being good. And so, I got to go prove that. But I'm not going to prove it to him because I don't think that there's value to either of us in doing that. I've got to go prove it to myself. I've got to hit reset here. And I think that was just the, it couldn't have been a better choice for me and probably for everyone around me.

**Whitney Johnson:** One of the things I'm, I'm finding myself admiring about you is that in that moment when he said that to you and as you described yourself, you were very entitled. And what were you, 22 years old or something? Exactly, 22 years old, that you were able to flip out of that and then go do the work of cold calling on pitches for nine months. And then when you someone cracked the door open, there was no entitlement left and you now were willing to do the work. And that to me, I look at that and I think, wow, that was probably, I'm guessing, one of the biggest inflection points of your life when you became an adult.

**Jason Feifer:** Yes, that experience guided everything that I have done since because I took away, you have to go to them. You have to nobody, nobody comes to you and says, you are exactly what I need. You have to go to them. And furthermore, nobody keeps you around just because. You have to be constantly delivering value. And if you're not, you're taking up space. It took me a long time. I don't know when I finally, like, came to really understand what this experience was for me because in the time I think I was just operating out of panic and instinct. But now that I look back on it, I think one of the greatest things that I did was throw myself off the cliff. Because, you know, you show up at a job that you don't like, and you resent the job and you can't quite make heads or tails of what you're

doing there or why people are keeping you around. And you start to have these expectations that don't match reality. And when you leave and you're forced to really work for your food, which is what I did now, I was a freelancer. I had to convince people to let me write for them on a story-by-story basis or I did not earn money to buy things. And that forces you to clarify very quickly what your real value is and make sure that you are constantly delivering it.

**Whitney Johnson:** For our listeners. Thinking about the S Curve, one of the things that Jason was realizing, and I guess I'll talk, talking to you, but I'm also talking to our listeners is it wasn't the right S Curve for you. You knew it, your boss knew it, and he eventually was going to fire you. Yeah, but then he kicked you off the curve or kicked you to the curb. Or you kicked yourself to the curve. Off the curve.

**Jason Feifer:** Somebody kicked.

**Whitney Johnson:** And then you, you switched. So, I think it's really powerful. Thank you for telling that, that story. So, what I would like to do now is segue. I just wanted people to get a sense of who you are and your mettle and what you're made of. And so, which is a wonderful lead into your book that you have just published, your next book called, *Build for Tomorrow*. So, you've built a life. You're talking about *Build for Tomorrow*. Tell us why you decided to write this book now.

**Jason Feifer:** Yeah, so I became I mean, you know, skip ahead many years from leaving that first newspaper job. And I eventually became editor-in-chief of *Entrepreneur* magazine, which, by the way, is not something that I could have ever predicted or was planning for. Frankly, for the majority of my career. I had never heard of *Entrepreneur* magazine. But but I got there. And as soon as I became editor-in-chief, something changed in the way that people understood me. I have a I have a long media career. I was a newspaper reporter for a while. I was an editor at *Men's Health*, *Fast Company*, *Maxim*, which was a terrible decision. I've written for a lot of places, and so, I thought of myself for the majority of my career, no longer, but for the majority of my career as a media guy. And so, I come to *Entrepreneur* and I became editor-in-chief. And people stop understanding me as a media guy and they start to understand me as, thought leader is a phrase I don't really like, but an authority, let's say. And I didn't know what to do with this. I nobody ever treated me like this. And, and people started asking me this question wherever I went, I would start to speak at conferences and be interviewed. And they would ask me, what are the qualities of the most successful people that you meet? And it was very strange to me that people kept asking me this question Why? Why are people always asking me this question? And I so, I thought about it for a while, and I came to realize two things.

**Jason Feifer:** Number one, if you listen to the questions that people ask you, you discover that what they're really doing is telling you what they think your value is to them. And that's a pretty powerful thing because it skips you right ahead to how to serve people because you know what the expectations are. Why were they asking this question? Because they saw me. They saw my value as being the person who gets to talk to everybody, which is true. That's my job. I get to talk to everybody, very, very famous people and also just really smart main street people. And it's amazing. And so, they think if I talk to everybody, I can match patterns. And so, I thought, okay, well, I should, I should have a good answer to this question. And so, I spent a long time talking to people, thinking about it. Whenever I would sit down with impressive people, I would just kind of weave this question in. And eventually I came to an answer. The answer was adaptability. The most important thing that people have, the thing that drives success is their ability to be adaptable. And then I thought, well, okay, well, how are they being adaptable? It doesn't seem to be something that people are born with.

**Jason Feifer:** It's something that you can learn. But, but how? And this was years of me puzzling over this. And then the pandemic arrived. And it was a fascinating experiment in that everybody went through the same change at the same time. And you could watch how some people advanced themselves in that moment and others didn't. And I thought, this is the opportunity to understand where and how adaptation works. And I came to this realization, which was change happens in four phases. That's what I'm watching. I'm watching people who are able to move fast, go through these four phases of change. Panic number one, adaptation number two, New Normal, number three, and wouldn't go back, number four. This moment where people say, I'm so grateful that I have this new invaluable thing in my life that I wouldn't want to go back to a time before I had it. And once I saw that, I thought, I have to put this down. I have I've gathered years worth of stories about how this happens. And now I understand the way in which it happens. And now I have an answer to the question that people were asking me many years ago, like a real answer, and it's a long one. And so, it was time to write a book.

**Whitney Johnson:** We want people to go buy your book, so we're going to just give them a taster.

**Jason Feifer:** Sounds good.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, you talked about the four different phases of what I would love for you to do is talk briefly about each phase. Let's start with panic. There's one quote that I love, but I won't read it yet. So, tell us about panic. And is there a story that illustrates this idea?

**Jason Feifer:** Yes. So. I think this is the most familiar phase for everybody. We've all experienced panic, perhaps experiencing it right now. And it was one of the things that I love to do, in addition to talk to entrepreneurs, is study the history of innovation. It's something that I do with this podcast that I have, which is by the same name is the book *Built for Tomorrow*. And what I've seen throughout history is these amazing moments of panic around things that today we think of as commonplace. So, the technology that you use, the teddy bear that your child sleeps with, the coffee that you drank this morning, all of this stuff was subject to some kind of crazy moral panic when it was brand new. And I thought that there was a lot to learn in watching those panics and then also watching people today go through their own panic. And so, let me tell you this kind of very brief story that I think illustrates the panic really well. Here's what I think really drives panic. Panic is driven by when change comes, it is so much easier to see loss than gain. Change arrives and it immediately alters or threatens to alter the way that we do something that was once comfortable. And we experience that as loss. And because we can see that immediately, we can, we can see the change. The only thing we could see is loss. We don't see the gain.

**Jason Feifer:** And because what we want the most in the world is to be able to see the future, to be able to predict what's going to come next, to anticipate. We start to extrapolate. It's very natural. So, we start to extrapolate the loss because it's the only thing that we can see. And we think, Well, because I've lost this thing, I will therefore lose that thing. And then once that is lost, I will therefore lose that other thing. And that may be sounds abstract. So, I'll tell you this story from history because I think it illustrates it well. So, turn of the century, late 1800s, early 1900s the phonograph is a brand-new thing, the first record player, completely new invention. And the this is a mind-blowing thing. You have to consider how absolutely mind blowing this is until then, until the late 1800s, for all of human history, if you wanted to listen to music, you had to have a human being in front of you playing an instrument. It was the only way. How else are you going to hear music? You can't. And then suddenly this machine comes along that can play it for you because it recorded it at some other period of time. It's completely mind blowing. Consumers were absolutely fascinated by this thing. You know, who hated it? You wanna guess?

**Whitney Johnson:** No. Because I read the book. Just tell us.

**Jason Feifer:** Musicians. Musicians hated it. Hated it because they saw the product as replacing them. And that was terrifying, understandably so. And so, they started to rally against this thing. And the leader of the resistance is a guy named John Philip Sousa. You might not know his name, but you definitely know his work because it has survived the test of time. He wrote all those military marches that we know. Da da da da da da da da. John Philip Sousa. And he was extremely famous at the time. So, John Philip Sousa writes this amazing article in 1906 and something called *Appleton's* magazine, where he it's called *The Menace of Mechanical Music*, where he argues against the recorded music and all sorts of hilarious now ways. And my favorite argument of his went like this. He said, okay, so if you bring a phonograph into the home. It will replace all forms of live performance in the home because of course it would. Why would anybody perform music in a home when a machine could do it for them? And because the phonograph will replace all forms of live music, mothers will no longer sing to their children. Because of course, why would they do that when there's a machine that could do it? And because children grow up imitating their mothers, the children will grow up to imitate the machines, and thus we will raise a generation of machine babies.

**Jason Feifer:** That was his argument. It was a, he's not joking around, and this is something that people took seriously at the time. Now, of course, now we look at it and we laugh. But I think that it's important to take his perspective at the time seriously, because what he was doing was, he was extrapolating loss. He was saying, because this thing is going to change, that thing is going to change. And then once that thing changes, that other thing is going to change. And it's loss, loss, loss all the way down. And now imagine doing that at your own job because we all do it. We have become comfortable in one way of doing something and then suddenly there's a new leader or there's a

new something, and we're going to change processes and you're going to say, Well, because I can't do that over there, it's going to change this thing over there. And then I'm not sure that I'm even going to belong in this company anymore. And now I'm not really even sure I have a job in the industry, we go real fast. And what we need to do instead is we need to train ourselves to start extrapolating gain. We have to start looking at these changes and ask questions that I just don't think John Philip Sousa considered at the time.

**Jason Feifer:** You know, things like when something new comes along, ask things like, I mean, really basic, what new thing are we doing or what new skill are we learning because of this change? And how could that be put to good use? Just forcing ourselves to imagine what that could be. I mean, if you imagine well, John Philip Sousa could have said, well, what are we doing to consumers are learning to listen to music whenever they like, wherever they like. How could that be put to good use? Well, I'm a musician. If I record my music, they can listen to it whenever they like. And also, people who are not in front of me can listen to me, because right now, John Philip Sousa's work was not very scalable. He could only perform in front of people that he could reach physically himself. But now he could record a record and it could be listened to around the country. John Philip Sousa, in fact, when you look at it this way, was arguing against an expansion of his industry. He was protecting a model that was actually limiting his economic value. That is crazy. But that's what happens when we are in a panic, and we don't see the gain that is coming.

**Whitney Johnson:** Interesting. All right. So, loss, loss, loss, loss, loss. And so, one of the things that you said that I think is terrific is quote from the book is "The lesson for me, which I took a long time to learn was this. When I'm asked to do something new, I will imagine all the reasons I'll hate it. Loss, loss, loss of loss. But I might actually enjoy it. So, the most important thing for me to do is don't say no."

**Jason Feifer:** Yeah. That was a really hard lesson for me to learn. But what I found is that. When change. Look, I mean, this we're talking about these four phases, and we'll keep going through them. But spoiler alert wouldn't go back as at the very end. I think that when you go through these new experiences, whether you wanted them or not, there is value on the other side of it. The question is how much can you trust that and therefore, how fast can you move through this process? It's a choice more than anything else. And the more that you can trust that there's going to be value, the less time you waste panicking and resisting and making crazy arguments that ultimately aren't going to benefit you or anybody else.

**Whitney Johnson:** Right. And part of what I think your model is, is hoping to do is to say, oh, I'm feeling panicked. All right, what do I need to do next? This is normal. Of course. I feel this way. I'm going to feel loss, loss, loss, loss, loss. How do I start looking for what the gain is?

**Jason Feifer:** That's right.

**Whitney Johnson:** Let's go to adaptation. I think for people who are listening to this and thinking about this from a work perspective, you have a story about work, your next job. Can you tell that story?

**Jason Feifer:** Yeah, sure. So, you know, it's funny, this the seeds of this really came out of that experience that I had with that first newspaper job that I quit. So, let me tell you let me tell you my philosophy that I've come to come to it's come to guide my entire career and then I'll I'll make it a little personal. So, okay, here's the philosophy in front of you, Whitney, but also anybody listening to this right now in front of me, there are two sets of opportunities. Opportunity Set A, Opportunity Set B. Opportunity Set A, is everything that's asked of you. So, you show up to work and there are things that are required. If you have a boss, there are things that your boss needs from you. If you don't have a boss, there are things that your customers need from you. Fulfilling those is Opportunity Set A, it's important. Opportunity Set B is everything that's available to you that nobody is asking you to do. And that could be at work where there are new and interesting responsibilities or teams to join or tasks to try. But it could also be things way outside of work. It could be starting a podcast because you like listening to podcasts, and you wonder what you would be like as the host. Whatever it is. There are all sorts of opportunities available to you and nobody is asking you to do them. And my argument is that Opportunity Set B, the opportunities in which they are available to you and nobody's asking you to do them. Those are always more important, infinitely more important not to say Opportunity Set A isn't important, you got to do your job, or you'll get fired.

**Jason Feifer:** But Opportunity Set B is where growth happens. Because if you only focus on Opportunity Set A, then you are only qualified to do the thing that you're already doing and that doesn't get you anywhere. So, I believe fully in Opportunity Set B. And the reason why I think that this is such a powerful way to think is because once you just start training yourself in this way to always be looking at new things that you could be doing without thinking about it. You don't need an ROI, on the new things that you're trying out. I started a podcast six years ago. I didn't know what the point of it was. I just did it because it was going to teach me something I didn't know. And I think that when you focus on that, you are just creating infinitely more options for yourself. You are arming yourself with new skills. How did I do this myself? I mean, I've been doing this throughout my entire career. This book, frankly, is Opportunity Set B. But, but I'll tell you one, one thread and that one thread is that when I was at, I was at *Fast Company* years ago, another business magazine. I was just a, I was a senior editor, which is kind of like a middle of the pack editor. And I, my job was to work on the print magazine. Then we started this video team and, you know, nobody asked me to be a part of the video team, but it just seemed kind of interesting to me.

**Jason Feifer:** And so, I, I said, Hey, can I do some on camera work? And they said, sure. And I took very seriously the direction that I was given, and I kind of got the hang of it. And I hosted these two series for *Fast Company*. And I, you know, the whole time I was thinking, what is this going to lead to? Is this going to lead to a tel, am I going to get a television show? Nobody's given me a television show. But what it did do is it taught me how to be good on camera, and it taught me how to talk on microphone and it taught me how to hold myself. And I started to do more and more video work. And then years and years later, I am in a conference room talking with the president and the CEO of Entrepreneur Media about being editor-in-chief of *Entrepreneur* magazine. And wouldn't you know it, one of the things that they really like about me is that I can go out and represent the brand because I'm good on camera. Now, that I just couldn't have anticipated that that was the thing that was going to pay off for me. And it's paid off in other ways too. But that's only available to you if you pursue Opportunity Set B, that if you just take the thing without knowing how it's going to pay off because you just trust that it will.

**Whitney Johnson:** And it looks interesting to you, right?

**Jason Feifer:** Oh, yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** You were interested in it.

**Jason Feifer:** I was interested in it. Sure. You shouldn't, you shouldn't do things that you don't care about because you will be terrible at them.

**Whitney Johnson:** Opportunity Set B. And it's, it's interesting. All right. So, so, that's your work your next job story was doing the video. Let's go to stage three, the new normal. Talk about that briefly and then I would love for you to share your theory of significance around this.

**Jason Feifer:** New normal, I actually think of as the most dangerous of all the phases because panic. Is natural and easy to recognize. And new normal is when we start to create some new familiarity, something that feels comfortable again. And I think that a lot of people's tendency is to stop there, which makes sense. We like comfort, we like familiarity. And at that point, what we need to do is we need to start pushing ourselves to be able to look at things in totally different ways. Because look, it's it's fine. It's fine to find something that's comfortable. It's wonderful to find something that's comfortable. But I think that the the more that you can challenge yourself to say, do I fully understand the opportunity in front of me? Am I fully taking advantage of it? Do I really understand why I'm doing the things that I'm doing? You start to see what's left on the table and how you can really push and reinvent either yourself or your business, or just the way that you do things, or think about things in ways that are going to be truly transformative. I'm not sure that this was the one that you were actually thinking of prompting me for, but I'm just going to tell you one thing that I have found to be extremely useful for me as I've been going through this myself. Which is to constantly ask this question, what is it for, about everything that I do? Because the thing is that we often think that we know what it's for. Why do I do this thing? What is it for? Well, I know what it's for, but maybe you don't.

**Jason Feifer:** Maybe you don't. I I'm in. I'm in. I hate I hate the word content. I hate it more than anything. And the reason I hate the word content is because it just makes it makes like thoughts feel like widgets. And I just I'm not

really into that. But for better or for worse, there's no other good word for it. And so, let's just say I'm in the content business. And, you know, it's funny, I, you know, I work at these I've worked at these large publications for a long time. And we're going through these massive changes and they're thinking about their business models. And and I myself, as an individual content creator, again, it makes me want to fall on the floor. But content creator thinks about how I can build a living in a business, creating value for people, creating interesting ideas for people, and helping people buy, buy, buy the things that I make. And anyway, I've started to think a lot about what is content for. It's worth thinking about. It's a hard question to ask yourself if you're doing something, what is this for? Because the answer might be different than what you thought it was for. I think for the majority of time, people in the media business thought, well, content is for monetization. I make the content and then I can if I'm making a magazine, for example, I can run ads against the content and I can also sell subscriptions to the content. Two ways to monetize the content. But now, mmmmm, harder because it's harder to sell ads and it's harder to sell subscriptions.

**Jason Feifer:** And I'm not talking specifically about *Entrepreneur*. This is the whole industry. And so, if you if you look at it and you think, well, okay, let's ask the question again, let's ask it hard. What is content for? What's the real answer to this question? Give me an uncomfortable answer that's going to force me to make uncomfortable decisions. Well, here's what I would say. Content is not for monetization anymore. I mean, it is it can be monetized, but not as easily as before. Content is for something else. Content is for relationships. And once you come to that conclusion, it starts to reorient everything that you do, everything that I do. I stopped. I stopped thinking about, well, I'm just going to make something because I can make money off of it, but rather I'm going to make something because it's going to build wonderful relationships between audience and me and they're going to trust me. And once I have that trust, I can provide other things of value to them that they will pay for. That suddenly becomes a new and far more sustainable business model. And it only happened because I asked this question a simple, simple question. What is it for? I think the more that we do that when we reach a new normal, when we reach some kind of level of familiarity, when we're dealing with things that we think that we know, and then we ask something so simple that it forces us to possibly undercut our understanding of it. I think that we reach a place where we're really starting to draft the next phase of the plan.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, it's interesting that you're saying that because I remember a few years ago actually doing some work with a media company. They have been massively disrupted and they were in a place where they were all in brand new jobs and they were sort of describing it as a new normal. And yet they were acting as if they were along the growth curve. They were acting as if they were in mastery, when in fact they needed to act as if they were at the launch point, and completely rethinking everything. But they had adapted just enough. "Oh, no, we didn't drown. We're okay." And I think that's what you're talking about, is the new normal is, Okay, things have settled just a little bit, but if you think you're actually settled, then you're going to get disrupted again and it's going to be even worse.

**Jason Feifer:** Right. Right. I love that thing that you just said. I literally just wrote it down. They were acting like they had mastery instead of being at the launch point. It's it's just it's just completely true. And and over and over again, I have found in my own work and in the work of the the smartest and most accomplished people that I've met. That forcing themselves to take a hard look at who they're serving and how they're serving and why they're serving. Prompts one, it should, a recognition that they didn't know everything, that they thought that they should. And then in turn, it creates all sorts of avenues for growth that they couldn't have envisioned before when they thought they knew everything. I often feel like we have a knowing problem. Our problem is that we think we know and therefore we rely upon that knowledge without considering what we don't know.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. And this goes back to the jobs-to-be-done theory, that I know Clayton really popularized, is this idea of what job are you hiring this to do, what's the functional job, what's the emotional job? And I really like what you just said about content, which is you're hiring it. Sometimes people will say to monetize, but what you're really hiring it to do is to build relationships. I think that's so powerful.

**Jason Feifer:** Yeah, it changes. It's funny, I right now, as we talk, as we talked, possibly by the time people listen to this, I will have figured this thing out. But right now, I'm kind of working on this offering for people who follow me, subscribe to my newsletter. And the thing that I am very confident about is that nobody wants to pay me for more content. I just I'm just so confident about that. Hopefully they'll buy a book, but they don't want to like pay for a premium newsletter or something like that. So, I started surveying them. You know, the best thing you can do if you want to understand how to serve people is to ask them. And the thing that I got back over and over again was people



want access to me and to the people that I know. And now that's a hard thing to scale. And I'm working on that and I have some ideas. But right there I think it's a validation of what I was thinking, which is that I'm putting content out into the world. People are consuming that content, but then as a result, they're not thinking, Boy, I want more content. What they're thinking is, Boy, the person who's creating this must have other value for me, and I really want that.

**Whitney Johnson:** Anything else you want to say on New Normal? I think at least for me, it's that idea of what you think is the new normal. Beware, it could be the plateau could quickly be a precipice. So, keep pushing, keep pressing.

**Jason Feifer:** I'll share one other quick thing that you can marry with, what is it for. That was four words we can cut down to two. Two is the words, but really. This came to me from Jim McKelvey, who's the co-founder of Square. And he was telling me that. When they released the square reader, this little inch long device that you could plug into an iPhone or iPad or whatever, and suddenly it can scan a credit card. You know, it was it was it was it changed the game for a lot of small businesses who couldn't afford to take credit cards before. And now suddenly they could. And a lot of competitors started to try to try to replicate what Square had done with the square reader, and they couldn't. And Jim said the reason for that was because people saw this piece of hardware and they thought that was the innovation. But really the innovation were these 14 other things that they had done in their innovation stack, including negotiating these completely new deals with credit card processors and so on. And he said there's a lot of people try to knock off the square reader and a lot of them failed. And the reason was because they didn't really understand the 'But really.' That your competitive advantage when you are trying to understand what your real value is and how you can leap ahead of somebody else, it's not necessarily in the singular thing that everybody sees, but it's in your ability to understand what is beneath it.

**Jason Feifer:** I am doing this, but really, I am offering that. It's also a wonderful way to understand the problems in front of you. If you create something new or you're grappling with something new, and there is there are challenges. You feel like maybe you have a hard time identifying exactly what it is that's going to move this thing forward. The answer is sometimes in the but really. Quick example, when those scooters, those like rentable scooters, like Lime and Bird were first hitting the streets, people were, I don't know if people can remember this because like happened so fast and now those things are so common. But people are freaking out about them or these cities we're talking about banning them. And there was a lot of concern over the safety of these scooters. Right. For people who aren't familiar, is this like a Lime scooter sitting on the sidewalk and you're like, what is this thing? And the answer is that you can pull out a lime app and scan the barcode on this thing and then it just unlocks, and you can ride it anywhere and then you just leave it wherever you're done. It's brilliant. It's great. Micro-mobility And people were getting injured on them, as it turns out later, we know, not at any higher rate than any other form of micromobility, but people are getting injured on them. It seemed scary and worth investigating. And so, Lime, one of the manufacturers did so. They looked into all their accident data, and they found that the vast, vast majority of rides were safe.

**Jason Feifer:** The vast majority of rides that involved an accident were not severe. And there was a very small fraction of a fraction of a percent where people were seriously injured. And they looked into that, and they found that a bulk of those happened on someone's first five rides. So, now you're looking at this and you say, well, now I understand it looks like I have a technology problem, but really, I have an education problem. And now that you have the but really, you have a solution for yourself. Because you could do what Lime did, which was you can set up these clinics in cities, free. Come on by, learn how to ride this thing. Take your first five rides in a parking lot or something so that you become familiar and comfortable with it, so that when you actually hit the street, you're past the point of greatest danger. That's a really powerful thing that you only get to when you're focusing on a but really. The thing that's underneath the thing that you understand better than anybody else, because you understand the problem, or you understand the opportunity better than anyone who's just looking at it from the outside. And that is the thing that can help us move past some new normal where we just have a thing that's new that we feel comfortable or familiar with and we can push forward to the wouldn't go back where we have something truly great.

**Whitney Johnson:** Let's talk about that stage and I would love for you to talk about dominant questions because I want to share something around that.

**Jason Feifer:** Oh great!

**Whitney Johnson:** So, what do you want to say about wouldn't go back?

**Jason Feifer:** So, sure. So, look, I mean, I already told you the idea behind wouldn't go back. Which is this moment where you reach anything so great and valuable, you say, I wouldn't want to go back to a time before I had this. And I think a lot of getting to wouldn't go back is recognizing the great opportunity in what I like to call reconsidering the impossible. I think, and what I found, as I've talked to entrepreneurs who have gone through great change. Particularly over the last couple of years, is that they have reinvented themselves in ways that often weren't radical. They weren't ideas that were like beamed down from Mars, you know, like it wasn't some supernatural forces came out of the ocean and gave it to them. These were things that were generally always available to them, maybe that they were already even aware of options, ideas, but that they hadn't really taken seriously. Because they thought that they were too difficult, too challenging, too impossible. I talked to this guy, Brian Burke, a business studies and legal ethics professor at Wharton, and, and I asked him why moments of great change can lead to these great wouldn't go back moments. And he said, crisis forces us to shift the window on the options that we're willing to collectively take seriously. Which is a nice and kind of tangled academic way of saying, I think, reconsider the impossible that we're forced to we're forced to move beyond the boundaries that we had drawn for ourselves of the things that we think are appropriate. So, that that leads nicely in a way to the to the dominant question, because I think that this is all about how we think. But before I launch into that, what were your what were your thoughts there?

**Whitney Johnson:** Explain what dominant question is. And then I want to tell you an AHA that I had as I studied about that.

**Jason Feifer:** The dominant question comes from to me came from a world-renowned brain coach named Jim Kwik. And he was telling me that it's worth thinking of your brain as like a filter or a deletion device, right? Like its job is to cut out as much as possible so that you can focus in on, well, frankly, anything. Because we're surrounded by so many ideas and inputs that if our brain isn't able to filter in some way, then it's too chaotic to focus on anything. I mean, like just think about this. When Jim was talking about this, I was thinking about like being in a crowded room and listening to someone speak. Somehow our brain is able to filter out everybody else except for the person who's speaking to us. That's a that's a remarkable thing. Now, take that thing that it does and just apply it to literally everything that you do in the way that you engage with the world. It needs some instructions for what it's going to filter for. And Jim told me that one of the biggest pieces of instructions that we give our brain is our dominant question. It's the question that we all have that we ask ourselves all the time. And, you know, it could be well, I'll give you the question that as Jim told me, he well. Before I tell you mine, I'll tell you is one of the examples that he gave me was he gave me a couple of examples. He said, one, you know, he knows a woman who her her dominant question is, How can I get people to like me? And if that's your dominant question, it's going to drive the behavior that you have towards others in what is often going to be a very counterproductive way.

**Jason Feifer:** He worked with Will Smith, and he said that Will Smith's dominant question was, How can I make this moment even more magical? And I came to realize that my dominant question, I think, is, What am I missing? Probably born out of my experience as a journalist, where I'm always asking questions and kind of trying to push for an understanding of something. But I totally apply it to everything else that I drive myself. Or rather, I drive my wife. I drive my wife absolutely insane because we'll go we'll go out to some event or experience or just with friends. And I will always want to stay out as late as possible, frankly, because I just keep thinking, what am I missing? There's going to be something else great that's going to happen. I have gotten myself into trouble. I remember once, once my wife and I were on vacation at a beach and I just I swam out into the ocean like way further than was than was safe. And then I kind of had trouble getting back because it was very wavy. Why did I do that? Because I just kept thinking, like, what's further? What happens if I go further? But but, but the great so it's like it has it has it's good. It's bad, as any dominant question does. But once I realized this, I realized that this question really does drive a lot of my actions.

**Whitney Johnson:** Question for you on wouldn't go back. Do you think that in that moment of wouldn't go back, your dominant, your dominant question changes?

**Jason Feifer:** Oh, that's very interesting. I mean, Jim tells me that you can change your dominant question, which is a foundational change that you can make for yourself. I asked him how to do it. He said, well, you know, it's not like

you can't pull the hard drive out of your brain and enter some new code. But what you can do is write a new question and make sure that you're seeing it all the time. He says, people, for example, will write their dominant question on their phones, home screen, so they'll see it every single time. Or they'll post it on their wall and set a reminder to constantly look at it. And I think just in the way in which I had introduced this question earlier, what is it for? You know, these are tools that we can use to train ourselves, to think and evaluate things in different ways. And we can do that with the dominant questions that we ask, too. And I think without question that if we get to a place where we have changed one of the fundamental ways in which we filter the world, and that change has enabled us to look at the world with more open eyes and minds then we surely have reached a wouldn't go back moment. Because who would ever want to go back to a time where you had a less open and motivating question.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, how do you find your dominant question if you're not sure what it is?

**Jason Feifer:** It's very good question. I think you find your dominant question by starting by identifying what your current dominant question is. And Jim said that the way to identify your dominant question is often to catch yourself in moments of stress, because in moments of stress is when you're really going to fall back upon the infrastructure that you've built for yourself. And even just journaling, writing down your thoughts or just catching yourself is how am I thinking? How am I approaching this right now? I think even thinking through what is a dominant question like this conversation we're having now, when I had it with Jim, it prompted an awareness of my own dominant question. And then I think that the next step really has to be thinking through, Well, what does this dominant question drive me to do? What are the negatives there? And then what do I need? What do I need going forward?

**Whitney Johnson:** I think it's very, very powerful. And, and one of the thoughts that I had as I was listening to this. Well, first of all, you had a quote where you said, "fix the filter you set up for your life." And I do think we we talk a lot on this podcast about disrupting your mindset and rewiring your brain. And and if you can change your dominant question. And we know that our subconscious mind doesn't know the difference between a truth and a lie. If you can change your question through repetition, you will alter the course of your life.

**Jason Feifer:** Yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, here's what my dominant question was and here was the big Aha. So, my dominant question was some form of how am I going to survive today?

**Jason Feifer:** Hmm.

**Whitney Johnson:** Not a great question.

**Jason Feifer:** No.

**Whitney Johnson:** But it nonetheless. And then I thought oftentimes I will ask the question, how am I going to be happy? Well, let's switch to that. And I thought, that doesn't work for me. So, I came up with a new question and this was the aha, this is the thank you to Jason.

**Jason Feifer:** Oh, I can't wait.

**Whitney Johnson:** How do I find joy today?

**Jason Feifer:** I love that.

**Whitney Johnson:** And I'll tell you why it's such a powerful question for me and why it reorients. Because joy allows you to make meaning of your experience. The things that work, the things that don't work, but to make meaning of it in a way that is productive for you and for people that you love, and to make progress and to move forward. And so that, reading your book, having this conversation allowed me to think about what my dominant question was and how I if I will simply ask a different question, I can reorient my life.

**Jason Feifer:** Well, first of all, that is fantastic insight. And you just did a, you did a great job of dissecting the way that you think. And I am honored that my book and kudos to Jim for introducing that concept to me prompted that in you. When you were telling me that the things that really jumped out at me was the difference between, How do I survive today versus How can I find joy today? One. Defines success in such a different way. The question How do I survive the day? Means that the greatest you can do is surviving. And that's not the greatest you can do. And by setting it as How do I find joy today? Means that success looks very, very different and it looks more rewarding. But also, and I think that this is perhaps the most important thing about the dominant question that you just set was, how do I find joy today? Inherently built into that question is the reality that joy can be found today. That, that is the most powerful. Because how do I survive today? It says nothing about whether there can be joy today. But if, if every day you wake up and someone says basically there is a there's a floating gold star somewhere in your home and all you have to do is find it. It's here today, right? All you have to do is find it. It's there every single day. It's not, Will I find joy today? That's a different question. Will I find joy today? Leaves open the possibility that maybe you won't find joy today. How can I find joy today, means that joy is there for the taking. It's just waiting for you. And all you have to do is be able to see the world through a lens in which that joy is possible, and then you shall find it.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, for all my listeners, there are going to be wondering Whitney, how does how does what Jason saying in his model that he's talking about fit in with the S Curve? So, I'm going to riff for a second and I'm going to give you an opportunity to kind of see what you think respond to it. So, you've got everybody knows you've got the S Curve, you've got the launch point, the sweet spot, mastery. It's built on Everett Roger's S Curve that we're familiar with. But this is a way to demystify personal growth. So, the way I'm mapping what you're doing with what I'm and how I'm thinking about the world is you're at the top of an S Curve. It may be an S Curve you like; it may be an S Curve you don't like. So, Prepandemic we were all on a curve. And then the pandemic came and panic set in. And then we realized, Oh, okay, well, we're going to just have to adapt. We were forced to adapt. And so, some people adapted really well. Some people didn't adapt so well, some of them maybe not adapting so well, moved to new normal too quickly, stopping still stagnating as opposed to really adapting. And so, you're kind of stuck at the launch point of this new curve, never moving off of it. But where the real value comes in is you panicked, you got over it, you jumped, you adapted, you started to see the new normal, you started to get comfortable, but then you push through, got to the top of that new S Curve, that identity shift that took place and said, I will never go back. I am a different person. That is why when people call it the great resignation, it is not. It is, in fact, the great aspiration, because we are different people than we were.

**Jason Feifer:** That was a fantastic mapping of these phases on the S Curve. I, I loved hearing that. I'll tell you, one of the greatest joys of putting something out in the world is watching how people absorb it and how it matches and adds to and gets added to by other great ideas. You know, it's funny I say this at the very end of the book that because the book is full of stories and exercises and a million different ways to think about change. And I and I say it's not possible, nor do I expect anybody to to use all of this. Instead, what I think we need to do is constantly expose ourselves to lots of new ideas so that we can find the ones that work for us. And so that we can enhance our ability to think through the most challenging problems. And so, as I was listening to you do that, I was just I was just thinking how these complementary ideas are really one and the same. They're helping people recognize where they are in a moment and that there are so many opportunities to move forward into bigger moments, and that what's really required isn't some, some radical throwing out of everything that you know, but rather an adaptation of the thing that, you know, with an openness for the things that you don't. And that's what's going to get you there.

**Whitney Johnson:** You have your own podcast called *Build for Tomorrow*. Based on what we discussed today, are there one or two episodes that you would point people toward?

**Jason Feifer:** Yes. So, I would suggest that you, you check out this episode about it's sort of framed about how to predict the future. But what it really is and as I'm talking, I'm like looking up the actual title so that I can it's called Real Ways to Predict the Future. And the reason that I direct you to that one is because what it's oriented around is talking to these really smart people about how to anticipate what is going to come next. And how to recognize what you do not know and thus should be open to. I went into it with this question. If we are to understand that change is inevitable, then the greatest question that we can ask isn't really should I change. It rather is, what change should I make? It's a really, really hard question. And I won't spoil the episode. And this is not supposed to be just some long teaser for the episode, but rather some value for right now, which is, I think that the answer to that question, which, which, which you really should, should absorb is like there isn't necessarily one good answer to that question, but

there is definitely work that you can do on yourself to prepare you to make the best decision for you. Somebody once told me there's a big you know, there are like two kinds of problems. There's a problem that has one solution. There's a problem that has many solutions. And, and big, big changes are not the kind of problem that has one solution. One plus one equals two. That's a problem that has one solution. The best thing that we can do is not necessarily to sit around trying to figure out what is the single best thing that we can choose, but rather how can we arm ourselves with the ways in which to see the world and our needs, such that we can make what is the best decision for ourselves in the moment?

**Whitney Johnson:** What was useful for you today? It could be something that you said. It could be something that I said. It could be an idea that you had that neither one of us said. But what what's what's sticking for you?

**Jason Feifer:** I'll tell you what's sticking for me. And that was your new dominant question. And the reason for that is, is twofold. Number one, because and I said a version of this before, but I just want to reemphasize it. When you if, if know, if you listening now are in a position to put something out into the world, the most wonderful thing about that experience is not that people just consumed the thing that you put out into the world, but rather that they start to use it in ways that you could not have anticipated. That is unbelievable. And it is rare really to get to see it because people read your work or they watch your thing or they buy your product or whatever, and you don't always get to see how it fits into their lives. And it's powerful whenever you do. And so, thank you for sharing that because I thought that was just incredible. But two, you know, it's funny. It I'm going to I'll kind of pull the curtain back a little bit on, on my response there. So, one of the things that I think I'm, I'm good at, so it's good to identify your, your skills and lean into them. And I think that one of the things I'm good at is, is pattern recognition. I like when somebody tells me something, I feel like I can kind of then apply it or apply that way of thinking to something else. And you know, when you told me that thing about that, you know, how do I find joy and and, and the thing that I recognized in it was that it created that possibility that every day there is joy. You know that my ability to have recognized that came from Jim Kwik, telling me this story about how Will Smith changed his dominant question, because his dominant question used to be, how can I make this moment magical? And the reason that they found that there was there's a way to improve that question is because how can I make this moment magical, presupposes that the moment isn't already magical. And that if you change the question just a little bit to say, how can I make this moment even more magical opens up the possibility that every moment can be magical, and that all Will Smith has to do is make it more magical.

**Jason Feifer:** And I really loved that, and I loved that kind of way of thinking. And so, when you were telling me your shift in dominant question, I was thinking about that shift that Jim had made with Will Smith, and I was seeing the pattern between the two. And it enabled me to understand what you were talking about at a deeper level. And I love being pushed into making those kinds of connections on the fly, because I think that it just it just builds a smarter understanding of how people think. And I think we should all be in that position to be pushed to make those connections so that we can bring together the things that we've learned so that they're more useful for others.

**Whitney Johnson:** Right. And it comes back to your statement that content is for relationships.

**Jason Feifer:** Yes, exactly.

**Whitney Johnson:** Any final thoughts?

**Jason Feifer:** One thing that I get asked a lot when I talk about change is if I think that every single change is, by its very nature good. Because if, if there is a wouldn't go back moment, you know, at the end of every change, then should that mean that we just discard every single thing that we do? And obviously the answer is, no. There is terrible loss that we would prefer not to have. The pandemic for all the good that it enabled lots of people to do, was also really terrible and tragic for so many people. And so, it's not really that. It's not about whether something is good or not. It's not about whether we should preference something or not. But what I've come to realize after talking to entrepreneurs for years and years is that that's not really a relevant way to think. And the reason for that is because it's not really an option. We didn't have a choice about whether the pandemic comes along or not. We don't have a choice about some terrible thing that happens in our lives. The only thing we have a choice about is what comes next. And so, I'm not here to say that we should cheer on every crazy thing that happens or that we should throw away everything that we have, but rather that we just need to be realistic that when big change

comes, it is beyond our control to stop it. And so, the greatest thing that we can do is figure out how to make the most of it.

**Whitney Johnson:** Jason. Thank you.

**Jason Feifer:** Thank you.

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Jason was fantastic. There are lots of takeaways, but I'm going to narrow it down to three. Number one, if you want to know what's valuable, listen to what people are asking. While we are in the exploration phase of any S Curve, we're gathering information, sifting through noise. We want to know what's important and use it to our advantage. In Jason's early career, he took note of what people commonly asked him for contacts, connections, access. If so, many people were concerned with this, it's clearly where the value is and where he should spend his time. It's a reminder that stopping and just listening, just paying attention can yield huge results. Jason just mentioned this in passing, but I thought it was important.

Number two, spend less time panicking. No matter what you say or do, change will happen. Your best laid plans will fail. It's not only normal but guaranteed. But Jason says, the sooner you stop wishing it wasn't so hard and start looking for the gains, the more adaptable you'll be. But don't stop there. Once you adapt, don't settle for the new normal. Have a plan in place for when change hits again. Like having your handy dandy S Curve in place. Because you know it will.

Number three, content is relationships. I love Jason's perspective on the purpose of his podcast, his book, and more. This is work that forms meaningful relationships with the people who enjoy it. It leads to new conversations, new people to learn from business opportunities and access. That was previously impossible. I know for me that one of the reasons I love doing this podcast is because of the relationships that I get to form, that I get to create, and it deeply informs my work as an entrepreneur, a coach, and an author. I get to talk with some of the smartest people on the planet and create something with that. As our listener Jennifer shared at the top of the show. This work informs people's lives. So, if people are saying that your newsletter or your TikTok's or your podcast or your violin playing or even your conversation is valuable to them. And you love doing it, don't you stop.

In the meantime, if you want to think more about FOMO, listen to our episode with [Patrick McGuinness](#), who coined the term. Links are in the show notes and for more on navigating change as a business, listen to [Rita McGrath](#), Columbia Business School professor. She wrote the book *Seeing Around Corners*. And by the way, I have quoted her in all four of my books. Thank you again to Jason Feifer for being our guest. Thank you to you for listening. Thanks to our producer and engineer Matt Silverman, audio editor Whitney Jobe, production assistant Stephanie Brummel and production coordinator Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.