

Whitney Johnson: If I want to go do whatever it is I feel like I'm meant to do in the world, which doesn't feel like it's this any more, I'm going to have to disrupt myself. I'm going to have to leave what I'm doing now. I'm going to have to take a step back in order to slingshot forward. That's what personal disruption is.

Robert Glazer: Welcome to Elevate, a podcast about achievement, personal growth, and pushing limits in leadership and life. I'm Robert Glazer, and I chat with world-class performers who have committed to elevating their own life, pushing the limits of their capacity, and helping others to do the same.

Robert Glazer: Welcome to the Elevate podcast. Our quote for today is from Lewis Howes. "Disruption starts with committing to excellence and taking a stand for your customer." Our guest today, Whitney Johnson, has built her life and career around disruption. She's been named one of the 50 leading business thinkers by Thinkers50, is the author of several award-winning books including, *Disrupt Yourself: Putting the Power of Disruptive Innovation to Work*, and *Build on an A-Team: Play to Their Strengths and Lead Them Up the Learning Curve*. Whitney has also been named a top 15 coach by Marshall Goldsmith, and is the host of the *Disrupt Yourself Podcast*. Whitney, welcome. I'm excited to have you join us on the Elevate podcast.

Whitney Johnson: Thank you, Bob. I am delighted to be here.

Robert Glazer: Well, we've had a lot of disruption in scheduling this, so I'm glad we made it work.

Whitney Johnson: Me too. That's funny that you say that. Yeah. It took us a while. Internet connectivity can be an issue sometimes.

Robert Glazer: Basic internet connectivity is still a struggle for many.

Whitney Johnson: Exactly.

Robert Glazer: Before you established yourself as a leading thinker and innovator, you actually got your start as a Wall Street equity analyst. How did that experience serve as a foundation for your career today?

Whitney Johnson: Definitely foundational. I think, maybe if I can go back just a little bit further...

Robert Glazer: Yeah. Tell us the full story.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah because I think it all plays into this. I graduated from college in music. When my husband and I moved to New York, because I got married when I was in college, which I know is probably a bit disruptive, too. We moved to New York. He's getting his PhD at Columbia University. We have to put food on the table. It turns out, I'm the one who gets to do that so I get a job, but because I've got a music major, the only job I can get is as a secretary to a stockbroker.

Which was good, except that when I would go to work every day and I'd sit next to all the people who were actually stockbrokers, many of whom were men and saying things like, "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that you should open this account," or, "Throw down your pom-poms and get in the game," and I'm kind of offended because I was a cheerleader in high school. As that sunk in and I listened to that over and over again, I realized I needed to throw down my pom-poms and basically get in the game.

Whitney Johnson: I would never have known to call it this then. This is now approaching 30 years ago. I was basically disrupting myself. I was disrupting how I was thinking about myself, what possibilities I believed were available to me. That was very much the beginning. I started taking business courses at night; accounting, economics, finance. That enabled to move from being a secretary to an investment banker. If any of your listeners know anything about financial services, they will know that does not happen. I had a boss who was willing, and committed to helping me grow, so I was able to move to investment banking.

Whitney Johnson: I did that for several years. Then, there was a shake-up because there was a merger, as happens on Wall Street all the time. I also churned out around that time, was having our first child. They weren't going to fire me because I had good reviews, and I was pregnant. They're like, "What do we do with her?" They're like, "Let's put her in equity research," which is a huge step back, a disruption. I wasn't choosing it, I was being disrupted.

Whitney Johnson: I get into equity research. We're now in late '90s, and discover that this step back was a slingshot forward. There were some things that I learned how to do. I learned how to build financial models. I learned how to spot momentum for stocks. I learned how to take a stand. I think this starts to answer your question, is I remember early on I was putting my first recommendation on a stock. I was like, "Is it a buy? Is it a sell? Is it a neutral?" I was just agonizing, full of angst.

Robert Glazer: It's always a buy. Especially if your bank is issuing the stock, right?

Whitney Johnson: Exactly. I'm like, "What do I do?" Finally, I have this colleague say to me... His name is Bob Goldman. I'm so grateful for him. He said, "Stop being a shrinking violet," which was a bit painful at the time, but I realize then that what was so valuable about this experience is, I needed to learn how to have an opinion. I needed to figure out, do I think it's a buy, do I think it's a sell, and then say, "Here is why I think this," and, "Here is why I think it's going to go up. Here is why I think it's going to go down. Here are my reasons. Here's the valuation," et cetera.

Whitney Johnson: That, I think, in many ways was the single most important lesson that I've learned in terms of becoming a thought leader. You can't become a thought leader if you don't have an opinion. Up until that time, in my 20s I realize that I had shied away from, and I don't know if all people do this, if this is something more distinctly feminine, or female. I had shied away from actually having an

opinion. That was very formative for me in terms of being able to do what I do today.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, and you touched on something that we were actually talking about before we kicked off here. Which is that you can't please everyone. I think when you have a strong opinion, I think for a lot of people, they have to learn to accept that you can't make everyone happy. In doing that, it tends to be muted in the middle. When you have an opinion, you're going to have some people that love it, and you're going to have some people that hate it. It's a matter of whether you can get comfortable with that, to some extent, right?

Whitney Johnson: That's so interesting, Bob. As you said, I made a connection that I hadn't made before. I remember, when I was making those stock calls I came up with a quote. Maybe I found it somewhere else, but I'm going to attribute it to myself is that, the only safe harbor is your conviction. As you say, if I put a buy on the stock, if there are people who were short selling stock, they were going to be mad, right?

Robert Glazer: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: If I put a sell on the stock, and people were long in the stock, like the owners of the company, they were going to be mad. If I were a neutral, then it wasn't helpful, so that was just annoying, and frustrating for people because what do you really think, because you do have an opinion but you're not actually saying it? It's going to go up, or it's going to go down, or it's going to create value, or it's not relative to the market.

Whitney Johnson: What you just said is, I got really comfortable doing that. The question is, as you're saying this is, to what extent can we use our ability to do that in a professional situation, and have that be an analog for our personal life of saying, "I need to make a call. I need to have an opinion," and get comfortable? The only safe harbor is our conviction. Get comfortable with the fact that sometimes people just aren't going to like what we do, or like what we say. Be okay with that, which takes an incredible amount of self awareness. Going to Brene Brown's work, this fundamental sense of our own worthiness regardless of the opinion of anybody else around us, other than ourself.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, and it's not only our worthiness. We do a lot of work. I'm a big proponent. I've talked about this in Elevate and spirituality around understanding your core values, and being able to articulate them. I think most of them, we feel it when we hit a red line but we can't articulate why it was. When we're clear on these things, I think it's easier to lean into our convictions because we understand that it's core to us, and it's just not going to feel good to go against it.

Robert Glazer: We make some of those decisions and they don't feel good. I think the reality is that it probably crossed sort of core value lines. I tend to find that when people

are clear about their core values, then they feel much more comfortable leaning into something, and defending it pretty heavily.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. So good. It's funny, though. As I'm listening to you say that, I find myself wanting to ask you what your core values are. Maybe you're like, "Whitney, I'm interviewing you," but I'm actually really curious. At the same time, I find myself thinking, "What are my core values?" I know I have them. Yeah, I think I do know what one of them is, which I'll share. I remember thinking, "How do I know what they are? What if I looked at quotes that I really liked? Those might be clues."

Whitney Johnson: I remember one quote that I've always really loved... loved. It's Ralph Waldo Emerson, and I'm going to paraphrase, "Rings and jewels are but apologies for gifts. The only true gift is a portion of thyself." I love that, and I think when I'm interacting with people and just having a conversation like we're having, or we were just talking about Thinkers50 in London last week, is this idea of when I'm talking to a person, am I showing up with a portion of myself as I'm listening to them, as I'm interacting? I think that's definitely a core value for me. Now, I'm really curious. Would you be willing to share one of your values?

Robert Glazer: Yeah, I share them very publicly because they tie to policies at our companies, and they tie to decisions. Mine are health and vitality, finding a better way and sharing it, self reliance, respectful authenticity, and long term orientation.

Whitney Johnson: There you go. Boom.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, and the core purpose that sits above those is to share ideas that help people and companies grow. The way I explain this is, if you're driving in a tunnel, and it's dark and you have a car if you hit the wall and are scraping it on the right side, you know you hit the core value, you know you hit the wall. You go to the other wall. If you can articulate them and it's self discovery because they're there, then it's like someone turned on the lights and gave you lines. It's much more efficient to get through the tunnel without hitting the walls.

Robert Glazer: In about 80% to 90% of cases, I find that people, they emanate from something formative, or early on in childhood where people are very drawn to something that was important to them, or are seeking something that they didn't have.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, that makes sense. I love it. Love it.

Robert Glazer: All right, but back to disruption. We're going to disrupt this train of thought. A lot of people understand disruption in business. How Uber disrupts the taxi industry, Netflix disrupt video rental. That's really not where your work is centered. Can you define the term disruption as it pertains to a personal development?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, absolutely. One of the things, the big a-ha is one that I had when I was working with Clayton Christensen, and we had founded the Disruptive Innovation Fund. He wrote the book, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, and coined this term, disruptive innovation. This big a-ha that I had was that this theory of disruption, it wasn't just about products, it was about people, and that people can disrupt. The big difference with personal disruption is that, you're Netflix and you're Blockbuster. You're Uber and you're the taxis. You're the silly little thing, you're the disruptor, and the incumbent because you are disrupting you.

Whitney Johnson: The a-ha came, I guess, from a theoretical standpoint, but it also came from an experiential standpoint. When I was still working on Wall Street I had gotten ahold of the *Innovator's Dilemma*. It was helping me understand. I was covering the emerging markets telecom and like, "Oh, this is why the wireless companies like American Mobile keep beating my estimates, because they're disrupting wire line telecom." I remember having this experience of, I had just gone to my boss and said, "Hey, I want to do something new. I feel like I'm at the top of my S-curve." I didn't say that, but I felt like it's time for me to try something to disrupt myself. He basically said, "We like you right where you are." Like, sorry but this is where you're going to stay if you want to play here.

Whitney Johnson: I remember reading this one passage of the *Innovator's Dilemma* and thinking, "Oh. If I want to go do whatever it is I feel like I'm meant to do in the world, which doesn't feel like it's this anymore, I'm going to have to disrupt myself. I'm going to have to leave what I'm doing now. I'm going to have to take a step back in order to slingshot forward." That's what personal disruption is. It's this decision to say, "Okay. I've got this Y axis of success, and I might be at 12 right now. The slope of my line, or my trajectory of success is over one, up one, over one, up one. I believe that if I will move down that Y axis," I will disrupt myself; loss of stature, or money, or prestige, or whatever, "From 12 to eight, I believe that the slope of my line will now not be over one, up one, but it'll be over one, up two, over one, up two."

Whitney Johnson: We step back to slingshot forward, because we believe that in disrupting ourselves we will be more successful than we would be if we stayed on our current course. That's what personal disruption looks like.

Robert Glazer: I know a lot of people know the concept of an S-curve, but will you just illuminate it in this context?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, absolutely. Happily, because I love talking about the S-curve. The S-curve, it was developed, or popularized I should say, by E.M. Rogers in 1962. He developed it to help you figure out how quickly an innovation, for example, would be adopted. We used it at the Disruptive Innovation Fund in investing in this notion of, at the base of the S the growth is really slow. It looks like not much is happening, but then you hit the knee of the curve. Sort of this tipping point, if you will. You move into hyper growth, and then at saturation that growth tapers off.

- Whitney Johnson: The next big a-ha that we had was that this S-curve could help us understand how we learn, and how we grown. At the base of the S, what it tells you is that every time you start a new job, you start a new role, you start a new project you're at the bottom of that S, or the base. Growth is happening, but it looks and it feels really slow. Once you know that, then that helps you avoid discouragement. You understand, of course I'm overwhelmed. That's what it looks like here.
- Whitney Johnson: The, you put in the work and you move into the steep part of the S. This is where in a little time, a lot happens. Unlike at the low end of the S-curve where it takes a lot of time for anything to happen. You're exhilarated, and you know enough but not too much. This is the part of hyper growth for you individually from a learning and growing standpoint.
- Whitney Johnson: Then, you get to the top of the S, and now you're really good at what you're doing, but you're no longer learning, you're no longer getting dopamine. You're a bit bored, and so your growth is going to slow. Basically, you've learned. Now it's time for you to leave and repeat, or disrupt yourself. When you understand this mechanism for personal growth, it allows you to become more effective in your life, and in your work. It also allows you to build a high-performing team, because you understand this mechanism by which a person can become a high growth individual.
- Robert Glazer: How much of the personal disruption curve is based on the slope of growth or disruption of the company? Does a company growing 30% a year inherently force more personal disruption than a company that's sort of flat lined? I have a graph that I use. We've been about 30% a year for 10 years, on average. It shows that-
- Whitney Johnson: Yup. [crosstalk 00:15:31]... by the way.
- Robert Glazer: Thank you. Feels a little rough sometimes. We have a graph. We show people, "Look, you need to get 30% better, or different just to stay on the slope." Are certain environments just more inherently create that disruption, and those challenges? Do other environments make it harder?
- Whitney Johnson: Yeah. I think you answered the question already, but yes, absolutely. If you look at the fact that our environment shapes who we are, that we're as free agents to shape, or choose the environment we put ourselves in, if you're in an organization where it's growing really quickly, then you are going to be in a position where you can grow quickly as well, or choose not to. Then, decide, "This is something else for me. I think I'm going to go jump to a new S-curve where it's growing more slowly."
- Whitney Johnson: Then, if the organization isn't a high growth organization, then your ability to grow, the onus is going to be more on you. It's almost like you're at the top of an S-curve and you've got to figure out, "I can either jump to a new one, or I can

figure out how to jump in place by finding stretch assignments for myself on my own, or getting coaching, or understanding the industry better, or how to become a better leader," et cetera.

Whitney Johnson: The short answer is, absolutely. If you want to grow faster, then you put yourself in a high growth situation. The work that we do is say, "If you're a high growth organization, whether you're a growth stage company, private equity backed, or a Fortune 50 that's trying to accelerate your growth, we help you become a high growth individual so that you can help drive the growth of the organization." Of course, if we're high growth ourselves, we all know that we're getting lots of dopamine, which means that we're happy.

Whitney Johnson: That's fundamentally what we always want to come back to is, how do we help people be happier? We help people be happier by giving them opportunities to learn.

Robert Glazer: Right. You said Brene Brown before, so let's channel that a bit. We're giving them dopamine, but they also need cortisol. Sometimes, the biggest, I think, learning opportunities don't feel like it at the time. They feel like stress, or something broke. I don't find that's like a clean process, but I think when people look back at some of the best work they've done, they would not at the time have told you that they were super happy at what precipitated it.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. That's so true, and I love that. I love the work from Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, the Loss Aversion Theory that we're more motivated by what we lose than by what we gain. I think that certainly is true. There are situations where we learn from what doesn't work, or we can. Then, a question becomes, and the fifth accelerant of personal disruption is to give failure its due. What I mean by that when I say that is, we all fail all the time. Then, the question becomes, what do we do with that failure? Do we allow that failure to crush us, and we just roll over and die, or do we say, "What can I learn from this in order to be better?"

Whitney Johnson: You and I both can probably cite experiences, or instances where these crushing failures have really made us who we are, because we were willing to sit back and say, "What can I learn from this situation?" We allowed it to make us stronger, as opposed to crushing us.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, and it doesn't have to be a personal failure. It could even just be a business challenge. It's interesting, and I think this is where people have problems disrupting themselves until they're forced to. You know all these friends, and heard these stories, and midlife crisis where someone wanted to start this business forever. Their job was good enough, and they were paid well. Finally, they were laid off and it forced them to go do their thing. Then, they were amazing at it, but it was really hard for them to disrupt themselves.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Robert Glazer: A bunch of my friends in midlife crises, them getting laid off would be the best thing that ever happened to them...

Whitney Johnson: Right.

Robert Glazer: They've worked 20 years to get where they are, the money's good, they know the game, but they know it's not what they want to do, and it's not making them happy.

Whitney Johnson: Right.

Robert Glazer: Earlier this year we got caught fairly short on people for where we needed to be. We had some ones we thought we were going to hire. They got countered offer. We had a few turnovers. Just, the market was really tough, and everyone was freaking out. Then, when everyone put their heads on solving the problem, "How can we interview differently? How do we look differently?" Suddenly, you have all this really good syncing because there's a problem to solve, which is really hard to do when it's working. Almost like some cases it has to stop working before people revisit it.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. A couple of thought there. I actually have this hypothesis, which you've restated on. In the United States anyway, 15% of the work force loses their job, or is laid off every year. I have this hypothesis that, when we lose a job, when we get laid off we're actually on the wrong S-curve, or we're at the top of the S-curve. We know that we should be jumping, and we won't do it because we're more motivated by what we lose than by what we gain. The universe just gives us a nudge. It forces us to do the thing that we knew that we needed to do. I would absolutely concur with you on that.

Whitney Johnson: The third, actually, accelerant of personal disruption is to embrace constraints. What you've just pointed out is that, when you're not able to hire the people that you wanted to hire, and you find yourself with this constraint of not enough time or money, or right people it can become a tool of creation if you allow it to be. I think from a law of physics standpoint we know that in order to have momentum to do anything, there has to be friction. In this particular instance, like you said, it's a business challenge. It can be a failure, but both are constraints that we can, if we choose to turn them into creations.

Robert Glazer: The constraint thing's interesting, if you think about some of the companies that are considered most innovative. People always talk about, you make better decisions with less money. Sometimes, the people with tons of money can throw money at different things. Those big, disruptive companies. I guess both scenarios are a bit different. All right, how do you think about that in terms... I agree with you. I think you make such better decisions with constraints. You may get to the same thing. You just probably are a little smarter about it.

Whitney Johnson: It's an optimization question, right?

Robert Glazer: Yup.

Whitney Johnson: If you have too many constraints, then you're in the developing world and people just can't get anything done, because there's just too many constraints and they crash. We all know situations where people just have too much money... to many resources. Not just money, but just resources, period, and so they can't make any sort of decisions.

Whitney Johnson: I remember there was a study that came out a few years ago. They did this post mortem of 200 failed startups. They divided them into the funded startups, the ones that had gone and raised outside capital, and the ones that were unfunded. The number one reason that the funded startups went out of business was they ran out of cash. They ran out of money because they hadn't-

Robert Glazer: That's funny. The companies with the most money ran out of money.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Exactly. Exactly. The ones that had basically built their business on operating cash flow, it was only the number 10 reason. I think one of the challenges when you're in a resource rich environment is, how do you impose constraints such that you're able to get that optimal performance, even though the constraints don't have to be there? It's a parenting challenge, it's a business challenge, and it's a personal challenge, actually, for all of us. Getting the right amount of constraints in place so that we will move up our S-curve as quickly, and effectively as possible.

Robert Glazer: We were talking about knowing your S-curve, plateauing. You've written a book called Build An A-Team that focuses on how to lead members of a team to improve as the business grows. What are the ways that leaders can make sure they have the right people on their team, and that their people are growing with the business, or when it's time for that person to make a change? How do you know who can make the change, who needs to make the change elsewhere? How do you think of the S-curve for a leader in their team?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. I guess first of all I would say, just recognize that everyone on your team is on an S-curve. I remember, a few years ago I was giving a lecture and someone said, "90% of my people are on S-curves. They just don't care." He was really frustrated, and I got it, but I needed to respectfully disagree that they were on an S-curve, and just maybe-

Robert Glazer: His team probably wasn't doing that great, if that was his view point.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Yeah, so I think that this wasn't necessarily the right S-curve for them. The starting point would be, look at your team as it's currently constituted. We've got this S-curve locator that you can take, and just have each person on the team take it. Be like, "Where do you think you are on your current S-curve? Where do I think you are on the current S-curve?" It allows you to start to have this conversation of, "If you're at the low end, or the launch point, then what we

now know you need is encouragement. You need us to value the fact that you're inexperienced, that you're going to ask questions like, 'Why do we do it like this?'"

Whitney Johnson: I'm not just talking about recent college graduate. It can be a brand new CEO. They're going to ask why do we do it like this, and do we get defensive, or are we open to that inexperience and those questions that can open the door to innovation? You need encouragement, and support at the low end of the S-curve. When you've got people in the sweet spot, what they need is focus because now, they're super capable, they're competent, you want to leave them alone, but they need you to continue to push them. They need that friction. They need those constraints in order to have the momentum to climb the curve. They really need you to appreciate them. Like, "Thank you for the good work you're doing. I do see you. I do appreciate you," which is hard to do because our sense of ego doesn't want to say thank you, because then we feel like we're in a one-down position, but they absolutely need us to do that.

Whitney Johnson: Then, at the high end of the S-curve you're like, "They're a master. Let's just have them keep doing whatever they're doing indefinitely." Which, obviously is a real problem because they're not getting that dopamine. What they need from you is a challenge. The challenge can come in the form of new stretch assignments. It can come in the form of having them jump to brand new S-curves. What I would say for you as a manager is, a starting point is just understand, where are my people on this S-curve, what do they need from me right now on the basis of where they are, and how am I going to help them grown, or build momentum along that curve?" Then, what you can also do, once you've composed your team is then look at the distribution of the people along the curve.

Whitney Johnson: What we're starting to see in our research is that the teams, or companies that are the most innovative have, on average, about 70% of their people who are in the sweet spot because they're not only able to ask, but they can also answer questions. They've got 15% of their people who are at the low end, who are asking those questions like, "Why do we do it like this?" Then, you also have 15% of your people at the high end, who are acting as a stabilizing force for people who are innovating along the curve. They can answer lots of questions. Maybe not quite as innovative, but they're stabilizing the organization overall.

Whitney Johnson: When you get that optimized, what that allows you to do is be a high growth organization, because you not only have high growth individuals, but you've now got this cocktail, or this amalgam of people, this diversity of thought in terms of where they are in their learning that can allow your organization to innovate. That's how you can build up into it from an individual to a team, to the organization is understanding everybody's on a curve. You manage them along that curve, and then you optimize those curves.

Robert Glazer: I know, you talk about how the plateau is dangerous, and I'm sure that you have a thesis on this. You also hear a lot of people say that... I don't mean to say that,

but you need some B players, or you need some people who are just happy where they are in the organization or else you'll have chaos. I know from your perspective it's dangerous to be at the plateau, but what if people are in a life stage? What if they have something going on outside of work? Is there a time and place to hang out there for a while?

Whitney Johnson: That's such a great question. The way I think about it is, I would reframe it to, if I've got a person who is doing their job and they're doing it well. Like you said, maybe they've got other things that they're attending to at home. They're caring for parents, or they've got young children, or they're training for a marathon, or they're a triathlete. Whatever it is. If they're showing up at work every day, and they're engaged and doing good work, then to me, they're in the sweet spot of the S-curve.

Robert Glazer: I was going to say, I guess the answer to that question is they're being disrupted somewhere else in their life, right?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, exactly.

Robert Glazer: Requiring their sort of attention.

Whitney Johnson: Exactly. The metric that you always want to use is, how long have they been on this S-curve? Look at their time enrolled. The only metrics that actually matter, are they learning and therefore engaged, or are they just engaged, stagnating, and therefore your company is suffering? I've had people ask me that question on numerous occasions. I'm like, "Are they doing a good job? Are they showing up and getting done what your organization needs to get done?" Their answer is yes, I'm like, "Then, they're in the sweet spot. Let it be." Not everybody has to jump to new escrows all the time. If you've got people that are happy in that role, then they're also functioning as stabilizers within the organization, which is fantastic.

Robert Glazer: What do you do when they're a fast grower and you know that they're at the top of the S-curve, they want to move but you don't have what they need?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Robert Glazer: I know you've got an answer to this too. I'll tee you up a bit for this, but what does an average leader do in that situation, and what does a great leader do in that situation?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Okay, thank you. You did tee me up. The average leader says, "We like you right where you are," right? You know, tough. Then, they run the risk the person's going to leave, or they're going to just check out. That's bad for that person. It's bad for you as a leader, because then you're not developing people. It's just bad for your organization.

Whitney Johnson: Some of the things that a good leader would do is, they would have a conversation with them. Not too long ago one of my coaching clients who's a CTO, he was telling me about a person on his team who's at the top of his S-curve. Super smart, super capable. He explained the S-curve to him, and he's like, "Oh. That's the problem. I love this company. I love working for you, but I'm bored." Then, that opened up the conversation of, "What could you be doing that would make you not bored, that you could continue to contribute in a meaningful way in this organization? What do you see?" Then, he can say, "What do you see? What are some things that you think we need to be doing?" That idea of, let's play where no one else is playing from a destruction standpoint.

Whitney Johnson: Then, you can also say to them, "Okay, but 50% or 60% of my time is currently spent on stuff that's boring, and dull for me." You're like, "Okay. Then, one of your stretch assignments is to figure out how to take what's taking you 60% of your time which is dull and boring, and do it in 20%, or 30%." How do you innovate your way to not having to spend so much time on that thing so that they are then able to continue to grow and extend out that S-curve?

Whitney Johnson: Now, there are going to be times when there just isn't a role for that person. The smartest thing that you can do is to say to them, "You're at the top of the S-curve. There's nothing here for you. How can I help you jump to a new S-curve with a supplier, with a client, or just in general?" Then, what happens is that you become the best boss ever, and if you've helped one person jump to new S-curves there are going to be 10 more people waiting in the wings to work for you, because they know that on your watch they're going to develop. Now, you've got a brand ambassador. You've got this person who goes out and says to everybody that they meet, best boss ever was this person." You've got people who want to work for you, and for your company.

Robert Glazer: Right.

Whitney Johnson: That's how I recommend people approach this very vexing challenge.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, and look. To what you said, you're probably going to have the same outcome, where either they left because they were annoyed because you felt that you held them back. They're going to think of you as someone who trampled on their career, or you're going to be honest and tell them, "You don't have the right opportunity to grow," encourage them to leave and go build themselves, and they're going to remember you for the rest of your career.

Whitney Johnson: Right.

Robert Glazer: You're going to have the same outcome either way.

Whitney Johnson: Which do you choose, right?

Robert Glazer: Right.

Whitney Johnson: When you look at it that way, it's easy. The reason, though, it's not easy is because our ego gets involved. It's always a consequence-

Robert Glazer: Yeah, it is the ego.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Robert Glazer: Yeah. You know, it's that famous quote, and I see it all the time where the CFO says, "What if we train our people and they leave? The CFO says, "What if we don't and they stay?"

Whitney Johnson: Exactly. Exactly. I love that quote.

Robert Glazer: One of the things that you said that, when I saw you speak for the first time, it really stuck with me and solved a huge problem for me was, "The frustration of genius is that what's easy for you is not easy for everyone else." I realize, one of the things that I'm good at is... I did strength finders, and my number one was relater. When people are stuck with a problem with a client, or a partner and they're sort of at war, somehow I can get on the phone and in 30 seconds I can understand what the issue is with the person, I can resolve it.

Robert Glazer: People would bring me in to solve these things, and I'd be getting so frustrated like, "Why can't you just do this?" I'd solved it in 30 seconds. Why is this weeks of agony? When I heard you say that, I really was like, "If it took me 30 seconds, then these are probably things I should do." Can you dive into that a bit? It was hugely helpful for me, personally.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, I love that. Yeah. Let me give the story behind it. One of the question that you're always asking yourself is, how do I move up the S-curve faster, and how do I even know that I'm on the right S-curve for me? One of the accelerants is, play to your distinctive strengths. Now only what you do well, but what other people around you don't necessarily do well. One of the questions that you can ask yourself to figure out what your strengths are is, what exasperates you, or frustrates you?

Whitney Johnson: The reason that you ask that is, if you're looking at someone saying, "This is just common sense," or someone's giving you a compliment and you're like, "Everybody knows how to do that," and they're looking at you saying, "No. Everybody doesn't know how to do that." Then, you can start to recognize that this is something that is one of your strengths, or one of your super powers. It very often will come that you're exasperated because you're just like, "I just don't get why people can't do that." It's like, for me, when people can't-

Robert Glazer: Or, be honest, they can't do it as well as I can.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Robert Glazer: Why is it so hard for them when I can do this in five seconds?

Whitney Johnson: Like, so easy. Yeah. For me, I'm really good at spelling. When people can't spell I'm like, "What is your problem?" Then, I understand what the challenge is, because I have a terrible sense of direction. We lived in New York City for 10 years, and even after 10 years... Excuse me, 11 years. Even after 11 years, when I would come up out of the subway, I'd think East was West, and West was East. I was a perfect contrarian indicator. I always got the direction wrong, because I just don't have a good sense of direction.

Whitney Johnson: Anyway, that's a digression. What I would say to you, anybody who's listening is, look around when you find yourself saying, "This is just common sense," you find yourself exasperated or frustrated. Pause for just a minute and say, "Oh. Okay. What that's telling me is I am really, really good at this. Now that I know that I'm really good at it, how do I use it deliberately, on purpose, in order to be more effective in the work that I'm doing?"

Whitney Johnson: For you, coaching moment is like, if you know you're great at this, how do you put yourself in more situations as a CEO of a business, and building a business more situations where that superpower can help you solve more problems? Monetize and productize, et cetera because it's something that you do uniquely and idiosyncratically well, and you want to just do more of it?

Robert Glazer: If you're tying that into the sort of S-curves, or peoples strengths, would you want to give people even more difficult challenges within that realm?

Whitney Johnson: Yes. Yes, exactly. Here's where a lot of us go wrong. Because what we do well is so reflexive, and no natural to us and therefore we get exasperated, we don't actually value it.

Robert Glazer: Right.

Whitney Johnson: Then, when I say to you, "Hey, Bob. I want you to have this conversation with the person," you're like, "Yeah, whatever. Why doesn't she give me something hard to do?" It's because it's easy for you, you're not valuing it. What you want to do in order to really be effective as a leader is to not only identify the things that the people around you do well, or that work with you do well, but then give them stretch assignments that require them to draw on those things. Don't make it easy, but allow them to stretch within that lane. Then, you start to create magic because they're bringing their superpowers to bear on something that's really hard. That's where you really start to make a contribution.

Robert Glazer: All right. Let's shift to the topic, quickly, of work life integration. I know you wrote an article for HBR recently about how it's important to use business tactics, like planning, scheduling and careful decision-making in our personal

lives. Why is that important? Why do we forget to do that? Do you have a personal story of where that's worked for you?

Whitney Johnson: Physician, heal thyself is my parting story. The way that article came about is that I had been out on the road for three or four weeks. Everything worked really, really well. Then, I got home and it just felt like everything had come undone. Part of it was that I didn't have an infrastructure, whereas when I'm on the road I have someone who plans my travel, and tells me, "Here's where you need to be." Here, and there, and everywhere.

Whitney Johnson: The impetus for that article, though, is I was talking to one of my colleagues. I was thinking, "I just want to be at home, and I just want to relax." She said, "If you had that, flip it. Like, flip it and say, 'When I go to work I just want to be at work, and I want to relax.' You would fire you." She's like, "Why wouldn't you do the same thing when you're at home? Why is it that you're not bringing your best self to home?" I was just like, "Whoa. That is right between the eyes." The thought that I had, after having this conversation with her... Between the eyes in a good way, where people show you a truth that you haven't seen.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, yeah. They're doing this to help you, right?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Robert Glazer: It's the cobbler's kid's problem. We never see the stuff that's right in front of us.

Whitney Johnson: Exactly, and so I just started thinking, "What do I need to do in order to bring my A game home, as well as to work?" One of the things, a very simple thing that I've started doing is, I have a list every day of the things that I'm going to get done, my top priorities, values, et cetera. I've realized, and this is slightly different but I think it still applies is to say, "Do I have on my list every day something that I'm going to do that's relevant to home?"

Whitney Johnson: On Sundays, which are my day of rest for religious reasons, but also for secular reasons of, I need a day of rest so that I don't have stress all the time, I have a different list. I make a different list of things that I'm going to get done on that day, versus the rest of the week. That's, again, applying this idea of, how do I show up as my best self whether I'm focused on work, or whether I'm focused on family and personal life, and church life, et cetera?

Whitney Johnson: Those are some thoughts for all of you to be thinking about. I guess the question you all ask yourself is, if I said to myself, "When I go to work, I just want to relax," and then we come home and say, "When I go home, I just want to relax," would you hire you as a wife, mother, husband, et cetera? That's how I think about it.

Robert Glazer: What are you working on that's exciting now? Do you have any new books in the works?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. We're working on two additional books, but it's still early days so I'm not ready to talk about what they're about. They're still going to be within the framework of S-curves and personal destruction, because that's what I love working on. The thing that I'm really focused on right now, apart from the intellectual property aspect is, we're at the low end, moving maybe into the sweet spot of building a business, of being an entrepreneur around these ideas, and what does that look like?

Whitney Johnson: It's not just, okay, we go give a keynote, and sell some books, which is super fun and super exciting, but how do you gain traction around those ideas? Whether it's coaching inside of an organization, training the trainers, then licensing the content, or certifying people on these ideas. Just building a business infrastructure around that, which is something you've obviously been doing for 10 years, and doing it really well. You're, I'd say, probably in the sweet spot of that. We're at that low end, and it's just fun and interesting to try to figure out how to do it.

Robert Glazer: Whitney, last question for you, and it's multi-variant. It could be singular, or repeated, and it can be personal, or professional. What is the mistake in your career that you've learned the most from?

Whitney Johnson: Okay, I'll give you two. I'll give you one recent one, and then a bigger one. I just finished a big trip. It seems like November's a big travel month for a lot of people. November, and October. One of the things, I don't track things well. While I was on this trip I left my phone somewhere once, I lost my credit card, and I lost my glasses. I lost a lot of stuff, and this is not the first time it's ever happened. That's been a repeated mistake, and it's something that is frustrating for me. My daughter's taking a gap year, so she was traveling with me. She's like, "Mom, you need to come up with a mnemonic of..." She came up with Piccadilly Pug. Like, phone, computer, debit card, credit card, passport, glasses.

Whitney Johnson: I think the mistake that I've made a lot that I'm learning from is that there is an analog cure of, we have to have systems in place. Personal systems that allow us to keep track of where things are. Also, from a business standpoint, the fact that I was losing stuff, I was taking it personally, like I'm a failure. Really, it's just a systems problem, and it's the same with our business. When things aren't working, it's not that anybody is a failure. It's just that the system didn't work, so we weren't adhering to the systems. That's something that I'm working on, and it's very iterative because it just is. That's one, I would say, that's a chronic one that I'm working on.

Whitney Johnson: One that I think is less chronic, but was certainly important and impactful. A few years ago I was giving a speech to people in the financial services. I'm thinking, "These are my people," but they hated it. My ratings, I was the last. No one rated me high. I think everybody rated me the lowest by far, and it was devastating for me. All these comment cards saying how bad it was. So bad that it really got my attention. I couldn't just brush it off like, "Oh, they didn't like me today." They just hated it.

Whitney Johnson: One of the things that it forced me to do is, what am I doing wrong, and what do I need to do differently? What I found is, it wasn't the content that they didn't like, they just didn't feel, number one, connected to me. More importantly, and this is something that I learned when I studied Donald Miller's brand. I think it's called StoryBrand. It was this idea of, in that speech, I made myself the hero. If you, when you're speaking, are the hero, then what is the audience going to do? I understood then that I needed to always, when I speak, make sure that the audience is the hero, and I'm the guide.

Whitney Johnson: The content can be the same, but the motivation, and how you talk about it, and how you frame it had to switch. When I did that over the course of several months, and now it's obviously a process where I'm constantly trying to figure out, how can I communicate what I'm communicating better? When I switched to making the people in the audience the hero, then I started becoming a top rated speaker, and it was all on the shift of my approach, and my perspective. It was, as you can imagine, really tough, but a really important lesson. It had to be badmouthed, to your point earlier, that it-

Robert Glazer: Yeah. I was saying, it reminded me of what we were talking about earlier.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, exactly. It got my attention.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, we usually bottom out before things get better. That's one a lot of people can learn from. I have worked with some speaking coaches, and they actually suggest really starting with a sort of humble pie beginning to get people engaged with you. Then, moving into the expert demonstration phase. I think there's definitely some truth to that as a formula that works.

Whitney Johnson: I love that, humble pie, and then you moved to the expert. Yeah. You think about it. When someone speaks, if you feel connected to them then you want to hear what they have to say. If you don't feel connected to them, you just don't. You just don't.

Robert Glazer: Right. If you were giving a speech on how to make a great speech, and you started with that story of, here are my comment cards from the speech, you would have the audience sort of endeared to you from the beginning.

Whitney Johnson: Right.

Robert Glazer: Whitney, where can people find out about you, and all your work and your assessments, and all the stuff you have out? Books, all the stuff you have out there.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, I think the easiest place is just to go to our website, whitneyjohnson.com. From a understanding more our work, I would listen to podcast episodes. We're podcast listeners, and this crowd is episodes 100 and 120 that really take a deep dive on taking the right risks and playing to your strengths. I think that's a great

starting place if you want to just have a better sense of the work that we're doing.

Robert Glazer: Okay, great. Whitney, thank you so much for taking the time to talk all things personal disruption with us today.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, thank you, Bob, for having me. I really appreciate it.

Robert Glazer: All right, to our listeners, thanks for tuning in to the Elevate podcast today. We'll include links to Whitney, and her books and resources. Everything she just mentioned on the detailed episode page at [robertglazer.com](http://robertglazer.com). Thanks again for your continued support. Until next time, keep Elevated.

Robert Glazer: (silence)