Whitney Johnson (00:00):

If you want to transform your organization, if you want to lead, you must change yourself. The fundamental unit of growth in any organization is the individual. So, if you are not learning, you cannot lead.

Celisa Steele (00:23):

I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb (00:24):

I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast. Welcome to episode 303, which features a conversation with Whitney Johnson. Whitney is CEO of Disruption Advisors and hosts the long-running Disrupt Yourself podcast. She's also the author of multiple books, including *Disrupt Yourself: Putting the Power of Disruptive Innovation to Work* and, most recently, *Smart Growth: How to Grow Your People to Grow Your Company*, published in January 2022. Whitney and Celisa dive into the S Curve of Learning, which is a simple but powerful visual for understanding the usual progression of learning, regardless of topic and regardless of individual learner. They also talk more broadly about learning, leading, disruption, and innovation. Clayton Christensen, who developed the theory of disruptive innovation, was a mentor and colleague in Whitney's life and work, and she's adding to the field of disruptive innovation, deepening our understanding of how it works and what it takes to grow intelligently. Celisa spoke with Whitney in February 2022.

Celisa Steele (01:41):

I know that the S Curve of Learning underpins so much of your work. It's featured in a lot of your writing, including your most recent book, *Smart Growth*. Would you start by telling listeners a little bit about that S Curve of Learning, what it is and how it came about?

Whitney Johnson (01:58):

My favorite topic. I am happy to. Some people are going to be familiar with the S curve because it was popularized by the sociologist Everett Rogers 56 years ago, and he had used it to look at how groups change over time, and specifically he was looking at a new hybrid corn had been introduced into Iowa, and it was drought-resistant, it was easy to harvest, it had a 20-percent higher yield. Five years, only 10 percent of the farmers had adopted this hybrid corn. And he was, "I don't understand. This doesn't make sense." And then he saw over the next three years the penetration went from 10 percent to 40 percent. So there was this experience, as he

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examined the adoption of this new type of high hybrid corn, it formed an S, so very slow at the bottom, then it goes in this steep back, and then it tapers off its saturation.

Whitney Johnson (02:53):

We used the S curve at the Disruptive Innovation Fund that I had co-founded with Clayton Christensen to help us figure out how groups change, how quickly an innovation will be adopted. As we were doing that, I had this insight, this aha, that this wasn't just going to help us understand how groups change. It could also help us understand how individuals change, how we learn, and how we grow. So I had written an article in *Harvard Business Review* called "Throw Yourself a Curve" and wanted to start exploring how does this trace the emotional arc of growth and change, and I call it the S Curve of Learning. And the idea is that when you know where you are in your growth, you know what growth looks like, you then increase your capacity to grow. You can move through that launch point faster and have this tool or this map to help you grow.

Celisa Steele (03:47):

Would you be willing to share with us an S Curve of Learning that you yourself are engaged in at this point in your life?

Whitney Johnson (03:55):

I would be happy to. So there are three major stages. There's the launch point, where you feel like you don't know what you're doing, and the growth feels slow, even though it's actually very fast. And then there's the sweet spot, that steep part of the curve, where growth not only is fast, it feels fast. And then there's the mastery part, where growth is in fact slow. So you've got slow, fast, and slow is how you grow. Let's see. Well, I would say when it comes to podcasting, I'm probably in the sweet spot. I've been doing it for about four years, so I haven't figured it all out. I'm certainly not bored by it, but I feel like I'm pretty good at it in terms of preparing for an interview, doing interviews, et cetera. So I'm in the sweet spot there.

Whitney Johnson (04:42):

In terms of the launch point—oh, I'm on so many launch points. Just finished this book, and actually mastery is the book is finished, so it's important to not keep writing about that and move on because we need to come up with new topics and new ideas. And I know one of my editor writers said, "Can we talk about something other than the launch point, sweet spot, and mastery?" So that's a mastery piece. But from a launch point perspective, I would say, certainly still at the launch point of getting this book and these ideas out into the world. I feel like I'm absolutely at the launch point when it comes to scaling this business because five years ago I was a solopreneur. I did a lot of speaking. I did writing. And now I'm in this place of we've got this technology tool that people can use, we've got books and podcasts, and we're in the process of scaling this business, and, from that standpoint of being a CEO that's scaling a business, definitely the launch point.

Celisa Steele (05:47):

One thing that occurred to me is that, as with so many things in life, I think perspective is really important. Even in those examples that you were giving, it seems like there's the potential to zoom in or zoom out on an S Curve of Learning. So if you zoom out, being a better communicator or growing your business, something that's really big. If you zoom in, then it might be more of a discernible skill, like learning how to better communicate via e-mail or

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managing people or something like that. So how do you decide how to define the S Curve of Learning, or does it even matter what perspective you take?

Whitney Johnson (06:28):

I love that question. In many ways, it's a fractal because you can say, "My life is an S curve, my career is an S curve, every single role I've had is an S curve, every project I'm on is an S curve, and every day is an S curve." So, to your question, you can have an S curve, like you said, of I want to be an expert communicator. I want to, when I speak, when I podcast, when I write—let's take speaking for right now because I think that's a good one—I want to be able to instruct and inspire, and, when I finish doing a keynote, I accomplish all of those things. I am superb at what I do. So you can get to the top of that S curve.

Whitney Johnson (07:12):

But, to your question, there can be many, many micro curves along the way. Every time you give a speech, it is a micro S curve of how am I preparing for this speech? What is my content for this speech? What's my head game five minutes before I start the speech? And once that speech is finished—or the Webinar because we're living in a virtual world right now—once that's finished, I got to the top of that S curve. It's been an hour and a half or 45 minutes—how did I do? Did I accomplish what I wanted to accomplish? And what can I learn from that S curve to do another micro S curve tomorrow when I do another Webinar? But, over time, you take the accumulation or aggregation of all those S curves and look at, as I climbed those curves, did they allow me to eventually get to the top of the curve in being the expert communicator that I want to be?

Celisa Steele (08:07):

I know you emphasize needing to celebrate victory. Breaking down the big S curve into the smaller S curves that contribute to it also gives you that opportunity to celebrate accomplishments along the way.

Whitney Johnson (08:19):

Yeah, absolutely. It's interesting, one of the researchers that I cite in the book is BJ Fogg, who's at Stanford, and he talks about how emotions create habits. And, at the launch point, if when you're doing something new you say, "I did it. I'm doing this thing. I'm figuring this out," and in the sweet spot you say, "I'm doing it," and then in the mastery you say, "I did it," you're wiring your brain to celebrate the fact that you did something new, and it feels good because you're getting dopamine for accomplishing what you wanted to accomplish. That celebration becomes a very important part of the growth. It also honors the fact that you're doing something hard and challenging and trying to figure something new out, and that's important psychologically.

Celisa Steele (09:05):

It occurs to me too that as part of breaking down any S curve, whether it's the bigger picture or one of the smaller ones, that it's like that a mix of informal and formal learning might contribute to progress along that S curve. On the formal end, it might be classes or workshop. On the informal side, it might be trial and error, trying something out. It might be conversations that you have with others. Do you have any thoughts on how to best optimize the "right" mix of informal versus formal learning to achieve any S curve?

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Whitney Johnson (09:44):

That's a great question, Celisa. What I would say is it's really going to depend on your learning style because some people learn from books, some people learn watching people, some people learn from YouTube videos that are explaining how to do something, some people learn by listening, some people learn by reading. There's an optimal mix for you, and there's optimal mix for me, but I don't know that there's an optimal mix for humans generally.

Celisa Steele (10:17):

That makes sense in terms of allowing learners potentially to personalize and to gravitate towards the more formal or the informal, perhaps depending on where they are on that S curve. More formal might make more sense earlier on when you know less, and some of the more informal could make sense later, as you do develop some of that flow and that mastery as you move on towards the end. I'm curious how you might articulate the value or application of the S Curve of Learning for learning businesses that are out there, serving these individual learners. What's the value in being able to show learners this path that they're on to achieve a particular goal?

Whitney Johnson (11:09):

Yeah, so I alluded to this, but let me do a slightly deeper dive. Whenever you start something new—you're working with learning organizations, and you're approaching them and talking about the work that you do, and you're starting a relationship with them—your brain is running a predictive model, and you have this hypothesis about what is it going to take for us to develop a really strong working relationship. We're at the launch point of the curve, and what is it going to take to get into mastery, where we're working together, we have solutions, they find them useful, there's this win-win very simpatico situation? At the launch point of the curve, you've got this hypothesis based on past experiences, but you also don't know. You're going to make lots of predictions, and many of which are going to be wrong. So your dopamine's going to drop. You're also looking at a lot of information. Your brain's literally making memories, and it's exhausting trying to figure out what that's going to look like.

Whitney Johnson (12:08):

And, oh, by the way, from an identity perspective, yeah, you were really great at servicing this other customer or client, but you don't know how to service them, so am I good at what I'm doing? I don't know. At that launch point, there's the frustration and the overwhelm and the impatience and discouragement, and all those things are in place. But, when you know that, you normalize the experience, and so you give yourself grace. You're patient with yourself and say, "It was hard today." Doesn't mean you're not good at what you're doing. It doesn't mean that you're not competent. It's just that the growth is not yet apparent. And that gives you this sense of, "Oh, I can do this. This isn't me. It's just I'm doing something new."

Whitney Johnson (12:51):

And the thing that's so important to remember—and because you're working with learning organizations, you all know this—is that the older we get, the more we can insulate ourselves from ever doing anything new. When you're young, you're forced to do new all the time. You don't have to do new. You can get away with doing new never as you get older. So that feeling of unfamiliarity and discomfort can become somewhat foreign. But, when you know that it's going to be uncomfortable, it makes it easier to manage. Then what's going to happen is you're to keep running that model, and you're going to keep experimenting. "Oh, does this work? Is

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this helpful to them? Does this add value? Oh, here's what boundaries I need to set with them as we're working together." Those predictions are going to get accurate. You're going to move into the sweet spot, and you're going to feel like, "We're in a groove. We're working really, really well together. This is great. We both feel like we're winning."

Whitney Johnson (13:42):

And then you want to stay in that place as long as possible. But sometimes you're going to get to the top of the curve, and we've had this happen with some of our clients where we did the job that they needed us to do. So we're finished because they've progressed to where they wanted to go. So, if we can both recognize that, then we can amicably say, "Good. We did it. We accomplished what we needed to do. I wish you well as you move on, and I'm going to go work with other people who need what we can provide right now." When you understand that slow, fast, slow, you understand the overwhelm, the exhilaration that, "Ooh, yep, I think we're finished," and honor that growth cycle, it allows the separation, if you will, to be amicable because you know that you both did what you came to do, so now it's time to move on.

Celisa Steele (14:32):

You make the point as well that it's not necessarily just at that point of mastery where you might, in your example, part ways, and you've accomplished a goal, and each party goes on to pursue something else, but also even earlier on during that launch point. There's this idea that the launch point is a phase of exploration, which could result perhaps in not moving forward.

Whitney Johnson (14:56):

Absolutely correct. If you look at the research, the disruption research that we looked at is that, even when you pursue a disruptive course, and you're playing where no one else is playing, yes, the odds go up, but they go up from 6 percent to 36 percent. So there's still a 64-percent chance that it's not going to work. That means that when you try something new, or you've got a prospect, there's a two-thirds chance, at least, even when you think it's going to work, that it's not. So part of the launch point of the curve is saying, "All right. I'm in this place, potentially this new client, and I need to explore here. Do I want to be here? Does this make sense for me? Is this in line with my values, my purpose? Is it in sync with what we actually do and are good at?"

Whitney Johnson (15:48):

And you say, "I think it is." So you've explored. "I'm going to stay here a little bit longer, and I'm going to collect some more data, maybe do a simple project with them, a crawl project—not a walk project, not a run project, but a crawl project." And you realize, "Yes, there's some momentum. We can work together. I can get the resources that I need to deliver on the project the way I want to deliver on it. I like doing this." You start to build that momentum, and you move into the sweet spot. But even then you may make a decision. "This is a no-go for me," so you jump to a new curve, but then you know that no S curve is ever wasted. But, if it's the right curve, then you're able to move into that sweet spot of working together.

Celisa Steele (16:33):

Leadership is an area where you give attention as well and focus on that. I'm going to ask a big question, which is how do you see the relationship between leading and learning? What role does learning play in leadership, and what role does leadership play in learning?

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Whitney Johnson (16:53):

I'm going to give you a data point that I think is fascinating and will make my point. Egon Zehnder recently did a study. They surveyed a thousand CEOs. Eighty percent of those CEOs strongly agreed—100 percent agreed, 80 percent strongly agreed—that they needed to transform the organization and themselves. You agree with me, no doubt. Your listeners agree with me, no doubt. But, prior to the pandemic, that number was only 26 percent. If you want to transform your organization, if you want to lead, you must change yourself. The fundamental unit of growth in any organization is the individual. So, if you are not learning, you cannot lead.

Celisa Steele (17:44):

You're right. I definitely agree with that perspective, and it's kind of amazing that it may have taken a pandemic to convince more people of it. But there are some silver linings coming out, though.

Whitney Johnson (17:55):

That's right. That's right. And that is a silver lining. Absolutely.

Celisa Steele (17:58):

So another big question, wide, open-ended. What advice do you have for a learning business that's learning to grow to the next level? What can they do to help ensure that they thrive in the future?

Whitney Johnson (18:14):

I have a few thoughts. We have an S Curve Insight Tool, and we measure three major things. One of the ways that you can thrive as a business is to know where you are in your growth. We've talked about launch point, sweet spot, mastery. If you know where you are in your growth, then you know what you need to do next. If you're at the launch point, you need support for yourself, you need encouragement, you need training. If you're in the sweet spot, you know you need to stay focused. If you're in mastery, you know you need a challenge. So the first place I would start is make sure you are growing yourself. The second thing I would say is, once you know where you are on the mountain, then you want to know where your people are on the mountain so that you can help grow them, so you can help your launch-pointers gain momentum, your sweet-spotters gain momentum, and your people in mastery gain momentum or maintain momentum or regain momentum.

Whitney Johnson (19:09):

Now you know where you are on the mountain. We also look at what tools do you have in your backpack to make sure that you can move up that mountain? And some of those tools are going to be things like are you playing to your strengths? Are you good at stepping back in order to slingshot forward? So resting, taking a break, making sure that you are unplugging enough. There is a great quote by Tiffany Schlain that said, "What if we thought of rest as a technology?" Recognizing that if we're more willing to rest, we're able to be more productive. So you think about what tools do you have in your backpack.

Whitney Johnson (19:42):

And then the third thing is, are you creating conditions where people can learn? What are the weather patterns on the mountain? And, if you're a leader in an organization, remember and

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recognize that you are the weather patterns. You are the rain. You are the sunshine. You are the snow. I look at it from a keystone species standpoint. We talk about, "I want to grow. Is it hospitable for me?" But if you're a boss of someone, you are the keystone species. If you have a person on your team, and they're not getting sunshine from you, and they're not getting rain from you, and they're not getting the tools and resources that they need to grow, they are not going to be able to grow. So you grow yourself, and then you make sure you create the conditions where the people around you can grow. The subtitle of my book is *Grow Yourself to Grow Your People to Grow Your Company*. You start with yourself, but then you create the conditions for your people to grow as well. And then, by definition, your organization will grow.

Celisa Steele (20:47):

I like that emphasis on starting with yourself because, A, you can control that, and then, B, because, as you say, that's the unit of all change and all innovation, that individual. So it makes a lot of sense to focus there and then see the ripple effects go out from there. I know that you have done a lot of podcasting. You mentioned the Disrupt Yourself podcast. You've been doing it for years. You have 250 plus episodes at this point. I'd be curious to know—because as a podcaster myself, I'm always curious to know—what got you started with the podcast, and then why have you continued it, which may or may not be why you started it?

Whitney Johnson (21:29):

That's a great question. I initially started because I've always liked to interview people and have a conversation. And someone said this to me the other day, after being on a podcast, he said, "You want to know the essence of the person." And a podcast gives you this unique opportunity to do that. They're a captive for 45 minutes or whatever it is, and you get to ask them these questions and find out what makes them tick. And that is just fascinating for me. So that was one thing that I wanted to do. I think that I also wanted to be able to speak better, communicate better. So that was one also motive. I also believed or had this hypothesis that it would help my business as well, but I think that, initially, was fairly vague.

Whitney Johnson (22:28):

What I have found is I still like interviewing people. It has been an important development opportunity in terms of my speaking because I've had people listen to me and say, "You need to work on some of your pronunciation, et cetera." So I've worked on it. I think it's getting better, but it's not where I want it to be. It's turned out to be, when you read *Smart Growth*, and you look at the stories, you'll say, "Oh yeah, she interviewed those people on her podcast." So it's primary research. And then also I end up using it—and you probably do too, Celisa—when I have a client that's grappling with something. I'll say, "Go listen to episode 235. That episode will help you as you're figuring this out." So it becomes a teaching tool as well.

Whitney Johnson (23:17):

And then I think the final thing and perhaps a bit unexpectedly is that if someone's trying to figure out if they want to do work with you—and I'm sure you've had this happen as well—if they can hear you talking and interviewing, they feel like they have a better sense of who you are, and it allows them to gauge, "You know what, I feel like I trust Celisa. I want to work with her." So all of those things put together. It is a lot of work, but I can't actually imagine not doing it. Is that how you feel?

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Celisa Steele (23:48):

It is. At this point, yeah, it's become a habit. You mentioned some habits earlier. You get into the habit now, and it would be a habit that I would miss. Yes, definitely. Do you have an episode or more than one that might come to mind for folks who are really interested in learning and what it means to learn and how they can support others in learning? Any particular episode that you might recommend if folks haven't given you a listen yet and want to go try an episode?

Whitney Johnson (24:18):

So, in terms of episodes on learning, I think there are a few that would be useful. The first one is that we did *Smart Growth* chapter one, so you can go listen to—without buying the audio book—you can listen to the very first chapter of the book. So that's episode 252. Another episode that you can listen to is episode 250, where I talk through a number of stories that did not get shared in our article in the *Harvard Business Review* titled "Manage Your Organization As a Portfolio of Learning Curves." So that would be a very good way to introduce yourself more to these ideas. So I would start there. I think one other episode I would actually encourage people to listen to is Astrid Tuminez. She's the opening story in the book. She is an immigrant from the Philippines and grew up in a slum and now is the president of a 40,000-person university, so I think she is learning embodied, and I think it's very inspiring. So I would listen to that episode.

Celisa Steele (25:25):

Anything else that's on your mind that we haven't had a chance to talk about? This is the open-ended place, where, if there's something else that you'd like to say, please feel free.

Whitney Johnson (25:35):

I think that I would just emphasize what I shared earlier. We are coming out of a pandemic. People want to grow. We're in a period of post-traumatic growth. Severe stress can lead to growth. And I don't think it's the Great Resignation; I think it's the Great Aspiration. People are in this place of, they're not quitting. We're not resigning. We're just aspiring to more, and we need to find S curves that will allow us to do that. And the S Curve of Learning is a map to help you understand what growth looks like. And, if you understand what it looks like, you increase your capacity to grow. I would just underscore that this simple visual model can be a very useful tool, both to demystify personal growth but also to think about talent development and succession planning and configuring a team.

Jeff Cobb (26:33):

Whitney Johnson is CEO of Disruption Advisors, a tech-enabled talent development company that uses its S Curve Insight Platform to help organizations think about where each of their people are in their growth and use that understanding for succession planning, configuring a team, and more. Disruption Advisors also offers coaching, workshops, and keynote speaking. You'll find links to learn more about Disruption Advisors and Whitney in the show notes for this episode leadinglearning.com/episode303.

Celisa Steele (27:05):

At leadinglearning.com/episode303, you'll also find links to the specific episodes of the Disrupt Yourself podcast that Whitney mentioned and to Whitney's newsletter. I'm a follower of Whitney's work, and it was an honor to get to talk to her for the podcast. I highly recommend you check out her podcast, her newsletter, and her books.

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Jeff Cobb (27:26):

In the show notes, you'll also see options for subscribing to the podcast, and we'd be grateful if you would subscribe if you haven't yet, as subscriptions give us some data on the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele (27:36):

We'd also be grateful if you would rate us on Apple Podcasts, especially if you find the Leading Learning Podcast valuable. Jeff and I personally appreciate it, and reviews and ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a review.

Jeff Cobb (27:55):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. At leadinglearning.com/episode303, there are links to find Leading Learning on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele (28:06):

Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]

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