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Chutes and Ladders: Driving Corporate Innovation through Personal Disruption

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Whitney Johnson, one of the world's most influential management thinkers, joins Dr. Jack Zenger in this edition of the Zenger Folkman podcast series to discuss personal disruption and how it affects corporate innovation.

Johnson was a finalist for the Top Thinkers on Talent at the biennial Thinkers50 ceremony in London. She co-founded Rose Park Advisors, alongside Clayton Christensen, professor at the Harvard Business School. She is a frequent contributor to and writer for the *Harvard Business Review* and is a LinkedIn Influencer.

Johnson is the author of the critically acclaimed book *Disrupt Yourself: Putting the Power of Disruptive Innovation to Work* and *Dare, Dream, Do: Remarkable Things Happen When You Dare to Dream*.

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Many of us are familiar with the concept of corporate disruption, but personal disruption might be new to some of us. What is your definition of personal disruption?

Personal disruption is the act of applying the framework of disruption that we are familiar with, but to an individual. For example, you start at the bottom of the ladder, climb to the top, and then jump to the bottom of a new ladder—like the children’s game Chutes and Ladders.

Do you see personal disruption coming from a personal point of view that helps individuals in their careers or coming from a collective process of personal disruption that creates corporate disruption?



Both, but let me first give you an example of personal disruption.

Urban Meyer is a great example of a master of personal disruption. He coached football at the University of Florida for several years and won two national championships. In 2011 he jumped off the ladder and in 2012 he jumped back on another ladder. But he didn't jump to the top; he jumped to the bottom. Ohio State had a losing record, was under sanctions by the NCAA, couldn't play in a bowl game, and couldn't recruit talent normally. Within a year Ohio State was undefeated and two years later won a national championship. Urban is now at the top of a new ladder and has taken Ohio State with him. That's what personal disruption looks like.

To answer your question more directly, personal disruption can be for the individual, but what I'm advocating is the notion that companies don't disrupt, people do. If an organization wants to drive corporate innovation, it needs a framework in place where people can disrupt themselves.

Does the organization need to be clear about the disruption it wants to create from a corporate point of view and then make that known to key individuals in order to pool individual disruptions to a corporate end?

There's a battle cry inside organizations for the need to innovate and to be disruptive, yet employees often feel stagnant and have low engagement and productivity. I advocate for a bottom-up disruption. You can do it from the top down, but when organizations are willing to tell employees that they need to be an agent of disruption, but they first need to become a subject of disruption as individuals, and as managers facilitate those disruptions internally, you'll see people become creative, innovative, and come up with ideas and be able to execute against them.

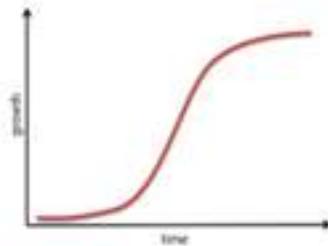
Specifically, I have reimagined the S Curve that we typically use to gauge how quickly an innovation will be adopted and applied that curve to the individual. Every individual is on a personal S Curve and every company

has an S Curve. If you can figure out where each employee is on his or her S Curve and then apply different accelerants to move them to the top of that curve, you'll have the framework for disruption.

What are those accelerants that help people move to the top of their S Curves?

Most of your listeners are familiar with the S Curve, but for those who are not, an S Curve looks like the letter “S.” At the outset, growth is slow, then moves into hyper-growth, followed by saturation where growth falls off.

The S Curve can also be used to understand the psychology of personal disruption. When you are at the outset of any role or job, progress is going to seem slow. As you put in the time, you accelerate into competence, and with that comes confidence. At the top of the curve, things become easy,



but boredom can kick in. It is important at this point to consider that this feels like a plateau, but it can become a precipice if you don't jump.

As a manager it is important to recognize that you are on an S Curve, but that you are also managing people on a series of S Curves as individuals, as a team, and as a company.

I've put together what I call an S Curve Locator that people can use to figure out where they are on their personal S Curves. (The link is provided at the end of this eBook.)



The seven accelerants that help people move from the bottom to the top of the S Curve before jumping to the next curve include:

1. Take the right kinds of risks.
2. Play to your strengths.
3. Embrace, and even create, constraints.
4. Battle your own sense of entitlement.
5. Step back in order to grow.
6. Give failure its due.
7. Be driven by discovery.

When you understand and can implement these accelerants, you can move up your curve more quickly and be more successful as a personal disrupter. If your company or team has a collection of people who are able to move up their curves more quickly, that personal disruption can then drive corporate innovation.

Most effective leaders are not developed because they are devoid of weakness, but because they often possess a small number of profound strengths. Can you explain how playing to your strengths can be an accelerator in the personal-disruption process?

When you play to your strengths you feel strong and you have the momentum and muscle to move up your S Curve. It is fascinating that often people don't know what their strengths are because they involve something that they reflexively do well. I encourage people to not only identify their strengths, but to be willing to put themselves in situations where those strengths are unique.

I ask people several questions as they try to ferret out their strengths. "What makes you feel strong?" "What's your go-to activity when you feel out of control?" This is not like eating a quart of ice cream or getting sloshed, but more like negotiating a deal, writing code, or running a spreadsheet—things you do to restore order and to be more in control.



When you feel in control, you feel strong. Another question is, “What are some compliments that you dismiss over and over?” You might think that you were just doing your job, but people tend to overvalue what they are not and undervalue what they are. Often your best strengths, your super powers, are not even on your résumé because you overlook them.

If people figure out what their strengths are and become willing to own them rather than disregarding them because they come easily, they are much more likely to be on the right learning curve and then to be able to move more speedily up that curve.

As you begin to get people to think about where they are on their personal S Curves, what can organizations do to create a climate where people are empowered and encouraged to practice personal disruption?

It starts with the manager having a conversation with you, from the get-go, and basically having a contract that covers your aspirations and where you want to go after the current role. If you look at the S Curve, a person is typically at the low end for about six months into a role (if you map against the 10,000-hour rule) and will get to the top of that curve after three to four years.

That conversation should include what I, as a manager, need from you and what we can do to prepare you for that next job after you’ve reached that peak of your curve, you’re starting to stagnate because things have become easy, and you’re getting bored. At this point, I will advocate for you to jump to a new curve.

One of the things that tends to make it very difficult, especially in large organizations, is that when you get to the top of that curve, your boss doesn’t want you to go because he or she likes you right where you are. You’re stymied, right? If you’re talented and skilled, you end up having to change firms.



If you know from the get-go that your manager is going to be your #1 advocate, you have that two-way street where you, as an employee, will make your manager look good over the next three to four years, and when it's time for you to move on, your manager will facilitate making that happen. This is where that personal disruption kicks in for both parties, but it requires that the manager sees him or herself, first and foremost, as a talent developer and then systemically, over the longer term, is rewarded for developing talent.

If you are looking at getting a new job, during the interview you should say, "Tell me about the last ten people who worked for you. What are they doing now?" If you find out that all ten have gone on to some interesting roles, then that manager is going to be able to attract and retain really good talent because you know that he or she will help you continue to grow and develop, which is the primary thing people want to do when they go to work every day.

A classic case of corporate disruption, one that your colleague Clayton Christensen made famous, was the decision by Intel to switch from producing memory chips to producing microprocessors. To make that switch, a number of people had to get onboard and move somewhat in harmony. How can an organization get a band of people to move in harmony in a common direction? Or can the organization just rely on individuals making that decision for themselves?

The Intel case is very aspirational. I think that there are very few organizations where you can do this perfectly because we are all individuals with lots of foibles and competing interests.



One aspect of this that is particularly important goes back to accelerant #4, which is to battle entitlement. All too often, as we have these agendas that we are trying to move forward through an organization, we feel entitled and don't do the hard work of trying to get the buy-in from our colleagues or people who are senior to us. "I have this great idea for a new product; therefore, we should do it." "I have this great idea for the direction for the company; therefore, we should do it." We don't ask ourselves what language our colleagues speak. If I'm the CEO, what language does the CMO or CTO speak? And how do I go about getting buy-in from them so that we can pull together and move in the same direction? In addition to the importance of getting that buy-in, the process of trying to translate your ideas provides an opportunity for you to actually get on the same page and then become equally yoked.

Do you have a favorite example of a company or individual that has done this really well?

I've seen companies, such as SAP and Microsoft, where people can be there for ten or twenty years and are able to continually disrupt themselves individually and continue to move forward and innovate.

One individual at Sanofi, Celine Schillinger, was able to gain buy-in throughout the company for the dengue fever vaccine. She figured out how to socialize and move her ideas forward by working and coordinating with a number of different constituents throughout the firm. She is one person that I can think of immediately who has done this very effectively.

What is the distinction between personal disruption and the general process of striving to become a better leader? Is personal disruption just an extreme example of people working hard to become more effective at their jobs?



I would say they are one and the same. Every time I do something differently, I'm disrupting myself.

There's a wonderful quote from an organizational psychologist named Judith Glaser that says that we are addicted to being right. Every time we argue with someone and we win, our brains flood with dopamine and adrenaline. The next time we disagree with someone, we argue again because we are addicted to being right.

But every time that you're willing as an individual or a leader to admit to yourself or to someone else that you were not right or that someone else was correct, you are in effect stepping back. One aspect of personal disruption is a willingness to step back in order to grow. That stepping back is your slingshot forward and helps you to become a great leader.

Is there a conflict between an organization's efficiency and its ability to operate at a peak level and what disruption might do to force the organization to drop back to a lower place and start again?

There is an absolute tension. If you are at the bottom of the S Curve—you're an entrepreneur or a startup—everything is messy and you're working hard. It looks like nothing is happening, but that's the nature of this phase.

As you start to figure things out, you move quickly up the curve. Part of that is that you have systems in place. There is a continual tension to make things more systematic and automated to keep things moving forward at scale, but at the same time, you need to continue to stay innovative. As an organization you're continually climbing a curve, but you've got to allow yourself the flexibility to jump to new curves. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "We are very near to greatness; one step and we are safe; can we not take the leap?" There is that moment of fear of being in freefall when you do try something new.



Which leadership behaviors best encourage personal disruption?

Learning-agility is the ability to deal with ambiguity, to walk into the unknown, and to play where no one else is playing. As a disrupter, this is what you're doing. At an organizational level, you must allow those who work for you to take on market risks, but as a leader, you're also willing to do so as well. When people that work for you want to experiment with something, whether it is taking on a new role or a new product, you must be willing to allow for that messiness. This requires that you, as a leader, be willing and able to be in uncharted territory. For most people, this is very uncomfortable.

I hear you saying two things. One is that leaders need to be willing to serve as role models and take risks. And secondly, leaders must have the ability to tolerate ambiguity when you let others do the same thing.

It goes back to the tension we talked about earlier where you want to have things systematic but also allow for innovation. It is the same as taking on market risk—playing where no one else is playing—versus competitive risk. We know that market risk raises the odds of success by six times and the revenue opportunity by 20 times, according to disruptive-innovation theory. And yet the reason we keep coming back to competitive risk, even though we know that the odds of success are lower, is because it is like going into battle and there's a known enemy. That feels comfortable. Whereas, when you take on market risk, there's ambiguity. There's no enemy. And you don't know exactly where you are going. Most of us really find uncertainty pretty scary.

I encourage people to understand that when you pursue a disruptive path, it's going to be lonely and it's going to be scary. In fact, if you feel lonely and scared, you are probably on the right path. This is true for you as an individual and as a leader.



As we come to the end of our time, how can we recognize, in our own careers and lives, whether the time has come to disrupt ourselves?

As I mentioned earlier, I have an S-Curve Locator on my website (link below) to let your listeners and readers determine where they are on their own S Curves.

If you've been in a role doing the same thing for three or four years, it is probably time for you to look into something new. If things have become very easy and you find yourself a little bit bored, it's probably time for you to jump. If you have a feeling in the deepest part of yourself that you need to try something new, and that if you don't, you'll die a little, it's probably time.

The innovator's dilemma is whether you jump or don't jump, there's risk. But it's always better to disrupt yourself rather than be disrupted, as a company, but certainly as an individual.

Finally, if you do feel scared, that's a good sign because it means you are moving forward. People who are thinking to themselves that maybe it's time to do something new or to allow someone who works for them to do something new, it probably is time.

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