BUILD AN A-TEAM: BE A BOSS PEOPLE LOVE

by Whitney Johnson

Many employees are not excited about their work. In one survey by Right Management, 84 percent of employees said they felt "trapped" in their jobs. In another, conducted by Vision Critical on behalf of Rasmussen College, only 22 percent said they had anything like a clear career path in their current job.

I've heard these complaints firsthand. In 2015, I published *Disrupt Yourself*, a guide to radically reinventing your own career. As I traveled in the subsequent months, delivering keynotes, consulting with organizations, and coaching executives on personal disruption, two questions came up more than any others: "How can I get my people to disrupt themselves?" and "How can I get my boss to let me disrupt myself?" It's ironic: Both employees and their managers want to experience the growth that can come with disruption, but it's not happening. No wonder true engagement is so rare.

Change, not stasis, is the natural mode of human life. Change promotes growth; stasis results in decline. Whether the manager of a small team or the executive overseeing thousands of people across several business units, proactive leaders get this. They cultivate environments that keep the work experience fresh. They encourage and facilitate personal disruptions. They recognize that the best reward they can give their people—the thing that motivates and engages beyond money or praise—is learning. It's what makes each of us more productive. It's what turns our organizations into talent magnets.

Managers who recognize this not only make a huge difference to their company, but have a direct influence on the lives of their employees. My own experience illustrates this. When I first arrived in Manhattan after college, freshly armed with a not-particularly-useful university degree in music, I needed to work, and I wanted to do something exciting. Wall Street in the late 1980s was exciting, but it didn't have openings for pianists, so I started as a secretary at an investment firm and took business classes at night. After a while, my boss, Cesar Baez, helped bridge the gap for me to become an investment banker. It was an unusual move, and it laid the groundwork for my entire career. It likely wouldn't have happened without my manager's support. From there, I went on to become

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an Institutional Investor–ranked equity research analyst for eight consecutive years. I was rated by Starmine as a superior stock picker, following stocks such as America Movil, Televisa, and Telmex, which at the time accounted for roughly 40 percent of the Mexican Stock Exchange's market cap.

But by 2004, I was hankering for a new challenge. I shared with a top executive at my company that I wanted to move into the management track, hoping to enlist his support. Instead, he was dismissive. He had a "We like you right where you are" attitude. In retrospect, I think I could have handled the conversation better. But at the time, I remember thinking, "I'm ready for something new, and if it's not going to happen here, I'll have to leave." Within a year, I struck out on my own. After I left New York, I cofounded an early stage investment fund with Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen called the Disruptive Innovation Fund. It was this work that would lead me to understand that Christensen's theory of disruption could be applied not only to startups but to people's careers as well.

Disruptive innovation, at its simplest, explains how low-end industry insurgents take on—and eventually outcompete—high-end incumbents who seemingly should have known better. Think Toyota in the 1960s. Their product and position was inferior to General Motors—what threat did the Corolla pose to the bigger, faster, better, more expensive Cadillac? Once a disruptor gains its footing, it too is motivated by bigger, faster, better. For Toyota that was the Camry, then Lexus. According to 2016 research by Statista, Lexus has a 16 percent market share in America, twice that of Cadillac.

In this article, let's look at the role of the S curve model in disruptive innovation, and more importantly, in *personal* disruption, a process I describe in-depth in my recent book *Build an A-Team* (Harvard Business Review Press).

To Boldly Go ...

In my research, I've found that people want to venture into uncharted territory. To take themselves and their companies where they've never been. And yet, we humans also like a certain amount of predictability. If given the chance to see our future in a crystal ball, most of us would peek. We like to flip a switch and have the light go on. When we can forecast the future, we elevate our sense of security. When we believe we control our circumstances, we feel more confident.

But control is an illusion and none of us know what the future will bring. It's a conundrum. Disruption fosters innovation. It also challenges current, and often dearly held, practices without providing clear alternatives. It's especially murky when it comes to finding the best way to manage your employees.

This is where the S curve model comes in. At the Disruptive Innovation Fund, we employed an S curve model, popularized by sociologist E. M. Rogers, in our investment decision making. (I wrote about a different use of the S curve in my Summer 2016 *Leader to Leader* article, "Embracing Constraints: The Sky's the Limit

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and Gravity's Good, Too.") In investing, the S curve model is used to gauge how quickly an innovation will be adopted and how rapidly it will penetrate a market. The S curve helps make the unpredictable predictable. At the base of the S, progress is relatively slow until a tipping point is reached—the knee of the curve. This is followed by hypergrowth up the steep back of the curve until slow growth occurs again, as market saturation leads to a flattening top of the S. (See Figure 1 for a visual representation.) The S curve model also helps us understand the development of and shifts in individual careers. S curve math tells us that the early days of a role, at the low end of the S, can feel like a slog. Cause and effect are seemingly disconnected. Huge effort yields little. Understanding this helps avoid discouragement. As we put in days, weeks, and months of practice, we will speed up and move up the S curve, roaring into competence and the confidence that accompanies it. This is the exhilarating part of the S curve, where all our neurons are firing. It's the sweet spot.

As we approach mastery, tasks become easier and easier. This is satisfying for a while, but because we are no longer enjoying the feel-good effects of learning, we are likely to get bored. If we stay on the top of a curve too long, our plateau becomes a precipice.

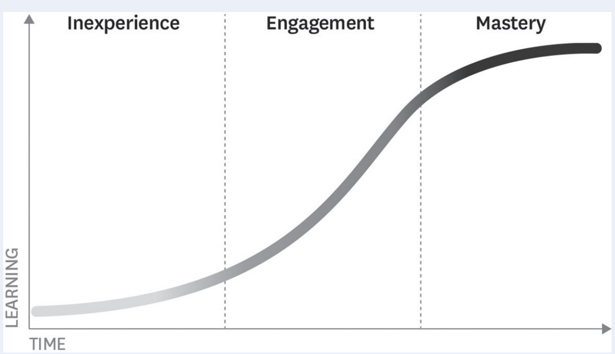

FIGURE 1. THE S CURVE OF LEARNING

Everyone Has an S Curve

In one of my facilitated sessions, a chief executive officer (CEO) said to me, "Eighty percent of my people don't have an S curve. They just don't care." I could hear the frustration in his voice; it was real. But his claim wasn't true. There are different types of curves and factors that can affect them, but everyone has an S curve. And throughout a career, most of us will discover several or even many of them.

If employees "don't care," it doesn't mean that they don't have an S curve—it means they are disengaged. Nearly every human being is on the lookout for growth opportunities. If a person can't grow with a company, they will grow away from it. As with any rule, there are exceptions. There are people who won't grow, no matter how you try to help them. But what about past high performers who are currently underperforming? If it's time to jump, and they won't, you may need to give them a nudge.

Think of the leaven in bread: A little bit is all it takes for the whole mass of dough to rise, but let the bread rise too long and it will collapse. The energy of the chemical reaction will have spent itself. The key is to capture the leavening at the right time, bake our loaves, and reserve some starter for the next batch. The energy of your employees is there, waiting to be tapped. But they will need to start over regularly. Ensure that they can, and they will provide the lift to your organization—and do it over and over again.

An A-Team Is a Collection of Learning Curves

Just as an investor's portfolio has diversified holdings (i.e., you don't put all your money into a single company), your team should include employees who are at different phases of development. Visualize your team as a collection of people at different points on their own personal S curves. Aim for an optimal mix of low-, middle-, and high-end-of-the-curve employees: roughly 15 percent at the low end of the curve, around 70 percent of the team in the sweet-spot middle of the curve, and 15 percent at the high end of the curve.

Assume that new team members will be at the low end of their curve for approximately six months—although this will vary, of course, depending on the difficulty of the role and the aptitude of the individual. At the six-month mark, they should be hitting the tipping point and moving onto the sleek, steep back of their learning curve. During this second phase, they'll reach peak productivity, which is where they should stay for three to four years. At around the four-year mark, they will have made the push into mastery. In the mastery phase, an employee performs every task required with ease and confidence, but this can quickly deteriorate into boredom without the motivation of new challenges to overcome. At the top of the curve, these high-enders can mentor newer team members who are surfing the low end of that wave. But before long, it will be time for them to jump to a new learning curve.

Mapping Your Team's S Curve

We've developed a diagnostic tool, the S Curve Locator (SCL), available at whitneyjohnson.com/diagnostic, to help you determine where you, your team members, and even your potential hires might fall on an S curve. It's helpful for each team member to see whether the results square with what they expected. If they don't, it's useful to ask why not. The aggregate results, from a managerial standpoint, provide a snapshot of latent talent and capacity for innovation.

Consider a global health care company. After administering the SCL to nearly 1,000 employees, we found that around 5 percent were at the low end of the curve. This phase is characterized by a high degree of challenge, intense stretching, and personal growth. Approximately 71 percent of respondents fell into the central portion of the S curve, indicating that they were challenged, with room for continued learning and growth. Nearly a quarter (24 percent) of respondents were at the high end of the curve, suggesting a level of mastery that may demand a new opportunity to help them stay engaged. While a manager could be forgiven for thinking that's a good thing, 24 percent is too high in my experience. These valuable employees have moved beyond the sweet spot into a potential danger zone. Most of them didn't want to leave the firm for something new. Most expressed excitement about the company's mission and values. But 40 percent of the employees were feeling under-challenged. For a manager, this is an important data point. If you have too many people at the high end, it's a surefire sign that you are at risk of disruption. People at the high end of the curve may be high performers, but if they stay there too long, they will get bored and leave, or become complacent. Companies with bored and complacent people don't innovate; they get disrupted. On the flip side, a large percentage of people at the high end of the curve, presents an opportunity: to capitalize on innovative capacity lying dormant.

By contrast, consider WD-40, a company with amazing employee engagement scores. When I profiled them in my book, my assessment produced the balance of numbers we would anticipate from an engaged workplace: A small number (5.6 percent) of employees scored in the lower range of the diagnostic, indicating that they may be dealing with the high-challenge portion of the S curve and the struggle to gain competence. The majority (88.3 percent) fell within the sweet spot of high engagement and productivity, indicating that they are learning, feeling challenged, and enjoying growth in their present role. A relatively small number (6.1 percent) of employees were operating at the higher end of the S curve, indicating a level of mastery that may require a new, more challenging path. An additional 5 percent of people were closing in on this mastery stage.

To be clear, not all employees on the high end of the S curve will need to jump. While some high-end employees may have fallen into a rut of complacency and entitlement, some may be able to stay in their current role longer if given stretch assignments. This

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is especially true in intellectually rigorous fields, where true mastery may require years. So long as we are aware that tedium can undercut performance, we can watch for signs that an employee needs to jump.

Chess, Not Checkers

Chess is the quintessential strategic game. Instead of having one type of playing piece on the board that represents you, there are many—there's a whole team. Unlike in checkers, in which many pieces on the board all do the same thing, chess pieces are defined by specific roles. They are designed to move differently and yet work together. A good chess player both understands the individual moves of different pieces and knows how to deploy them in complementary ways. As leaders, we see the whole board and understand the roles of different individuals. The team objective is achieved when we optimally coordinate these people's roles, always visualizing several moves ahead.

Of course, there are a few flaws with this analogy. The people we employ are not inanimate objects but rather free agents—free to leave our board and go play for someone else. Nor do they have a limited set of prescribed moves. The roles they fill initially may provide an opportunity for them to contribute, but ultimately may become limiting. Within an S curve is potential, but eventually, that potential is exhausted. As managers, we want to recognize when someone who has been functioning in one role is ready to try something new. Consider the pawn that makes its way across the board and is rewarded by becoming a queen. It's a powerful augmentation of the pawn's abilities—and of the chess player's options.

Jim Skinner, former CEO of McDonald's, is a good example of such a pawn. Skinner completely lacked the standard CEO credentials. He didn't have an MBA—he never even graduated from college. His first job was flipping burgers. But over four decades, he was able to assume a variety of roles that eventually led to the C-suite. When his predecessor stepped down due to health problems, Jim got the top job. McDonald's did well during his tenure, but Skinner's most enduring contribution may be his emphasis on talent development. Perhaps because he didn't have college credentials himself, the training and development of his employees was something Skinner took very seriously. He created a leadership institute a year after he became CEO, and required that "all executives train at least two potential successors—one who could do the job today, the 'ready now,' in McDonald's parlance, and one who could be a future replacement, the 'ready future,'" according to a 2011 *Fortune* article.

Hire Self Starters

During a restructuring at Novartis, Henna Inam shared with her boss that she had her eye on a general manager (GM) slot. Restructurings are frequently seedbeds for personal disruption. As a warm-up, they wanted her to do a rotation in sales, selling Gerber products to Walmart. Her manager for this rotation was Gary Pinkowski. For a numbers-oriented Wharton grad like Inam, Pinkowski's leadership style was unexpected. During their one-on-one conversations, he asked only three questions: How are you? How are your people? How is the business? Pinkowski's high-level vision and approach were evident in the number (only three) and the order (people first and second) of his questions.

Within three years, Inam was up for GM, with a choice of assignments: the opportunity to take over a sales leadership position for Novartis selling into Walmart—a billion-dollar business—or become the GM for Mexico, a $100 million business. The assignment in Mexico wasn't as high profile, but it would give her the opportunity to run an entire business, including the commercial and R&D (research and development) functions. It would also leverage one of her strengths: her cultural adaptability, developed through living in five countries across three continents. She chose the opportunity in Mexico, and by taking on this challenge, Inam now reported to Tim Strong, known for his trusting, hands-off management. Two years later, she had turned around the business in Mexico and was one of 10 people out of 90,000 employees who received an award for her incredible performance.

Conclusion

Managing a team as a collection of individual S curves implies a decentralization of power. People should be able to function independently enough that, with minimal oversight, they can both make their own fortune and operate for the good of the whole. Think about your best boss. Like Henna Inam's former bosses, Tim Strong, and Gary Pinkowski, now vice president of sales at Post Foods, your best boss makes it possible for you to succeed, confident that once you know the rules, you can self-manage. When you facilitate personal disruption, you build an A-team and become a boss people want to work for. A boss people love.

This article is adapted from Whitney Johnson's book *Build an A-Team* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2018).

Whitney Johnson's research and work in disruptive innovation shapes how individuals and corporations manage change. She was recognized as one of the world's 50 most influential management thinkers by Thinkers50 in 2017. In addition to Build an A-Team, *she is the author of* Disrupt Yourself: Putting the Power of Disruptive Innovation to Work *(2015), and* Dare, Dream, Do *(2012). She is also a frequent contributor to* Harvard Business Review, *a LinkedIn Influencer with more than 1 million followers, and host of the Disrupt Yourself podcast. She is a member of the original cohort of Marshall Goldsmith's 100 Coaches. To learn more about Johnson's work, or to contact her about speaking, consulting, or coaching, visit www.whitneyjohnson.com*

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