

Lee: [00:06](#) From Managing Editor Magazine, this is Margins. If you have the word 'content' in your job description, or if you're just interested in how we all talk to each other online, we made this podcast for you. And on this season of Margins, we're breaking down the creative process. I'm your host, Lee Price.

Mary: [00:26](#) And I'm Mary Ellen Slayter.

Lee: [00:32](#) We're calling today's episode, "Burn it all Down." We're talking about what happens when you decide that your big, creative project just isn't working and you wanna scrap it and start over.

Mary: [00:44](#) A couple years back, you know, we had found ourselves... We ended up running this agency blog, and, you know, it was pretty good for an agency blog wouldn't you say Lee? Like what, what were we doing? We were doing all the best practices right? We were following all the checklists, and like... What did you think about it?

Lee: [00:58](#) Yeah, so we were running our blog following all the content marketing best practices from, you know, 2010 through 2018, right? We were publishing regularly, we were making sure that we targeted all the right keywords that we thought our audience cared about, we were sharing what we considered to be our best ideas, our thought leadership, but we were just completely and totally bored. And I think it really showed in the content.

Lee: [01:25](#) We were having a hard time getting people to be interviewed for the blog. You know, who wants to really be featured on like a dime-a-dozen agency blog. It just felt kind of boring. It didn't feel unique, and we didn't have a draw. We weren't having fun with it, and I feel like that's when we knew that we really needed to make a change.

Mary: [01:41](#) And we were stuck, you know? And I remember we sat there, and we started brainstorming like ideas for like, "Oh we could redesign it," you know? "Or we could change the way we do the art," and it was like all of these like little incremental things. And we were just kind of circling around and, and so not really getting excited about anything we were coming up with.

Mary: [01:58](#) And I had, around that same time, engaged with a consultant, right? Like, a, a consultant who works with the creative at other consulting agencies. So his job is super meta, and one of the things that came out of that conversation, you know, it was about... He was supposed to be just like reviewing our sales

process and how that flowed, but he got to this point where he said, "Hey, you know, you do brand magazines for all these other companies and they're beautiful and amazing. Like why don't you do one for yourself?"

- Mary: [02:26](#) And we just kinda sat there in this call, like I'm like, "Oh, wow. Oh, wow. You just pointed out to me like the most obvious thing (laughs) that..." Like, I guess like, "Why didn't I think of that?" And do you, do you remember like when I came back to you and I started talking to you about like, I said like, "Okay, Jake says that we need to make a magazine." And like what did, what would... Do you remember what you, what you thought when I told you that?
- Lee: [02:45](#) Yeah, I thought it was perfect. I thought it was a big, huge, new scary project, and sometimes that's what you need to completely get out of your rut. So I saw it as a really exciting new path forward, and instead of just making little updates to what we are already doing, you know, just kind of putting a new skin on it or like slightly tweaking it, this was totally blowing it up, totally burning it down.
- Lee: [03:08](#) And that was exciting. That made me honestly excited about my job again. It made me excited to think about what people wanted to hear about, what we could tell people, who we could talk to. And so then we had this big idea. We came up with the idea of Managing Editor, and then I went and had a baby.
- Mary: [03:24](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative)
- Lee: [03:25](#) And I left you.
- Mary: [03:26](#) Yep, yes, and while you were gone, I went and found the domain that I wanted. So it turns out ManagingEditor.com was available for sale for no, um... I mean, basically, I-I remember sitting there going, "Okay, I can buy this domain and launch this magazine, or I can pay off my student loans." And I chose to buy the magazine, so at that point I was committed, right? There was no turning back (laughing) like once I forked over all that money.
- Mary: [03:51](#) And so then, yeah, while you were gone on your break, like we went through and went through the process of building it, you know, designing the site, working through conceptually like what it needed to be, so that about the time you came back we were ready to, to soft launch. And took it out in the world, and I would say that, for me like, it immediately changed the way I

thought about our work, the way that I thought about the conversation we wanted to have our clients.

- Mary: [04:13](#) I don't know w-what... How, what, what, wh-what do you remember about that time. This was like two years ago. We're coming up on two years Lee. Well, it's... Since we've launched this magazine like, and what would you say was the...? Did we do the right thing in burning down the blog?
- Lee: [04:24](#) I think we totally did the right thing. So for me, I came back my first day of work was the first day back after Christmas, so it was January 3rd. It was my birthday. Uh, (laughs)-
- Mary: [04:34](#) (laughs).
- Lee: [04:35](#) This wasn't even... I came back and I had this beautiful new magazine to run. We had turned it on right before we came back to work, and so we immediately started planning the content. And just, if you've made an editorial calendar before, which, if you're listening, you probably have made a few in your day, sometimes it can just feel really wrote, right? It's like, "All right, let's just copy what we did last month. Let's think of some slightly new ideas. How can we tell the same story in different ways?"
- Lee: [05:00](#) This didn't feel like that at all. It felt really fresh, it felt exciting. And I would say the most exciting thing for me was the immediate feedback we got. I felt like I immediately had a community of people who are interested in what we were doing and who were all speaking the same language. So within a month or two, people were writing us, messaging me on LinkedIn, emailing us, asking us if they could be featured in Managing Editor, if they could be on the magazine.
- Lee: [05:24](#) And that was just, you know, we kind of have whiplash from that because we had gone from running this agency blog on our agency website that kind of felt like a sales tool, felt boring, no one wanted to be on it, even when I begged them to please come be featured on our agency blog. People weren't interested. They wouldn't write me back.
- Lee: [05:41](#) But all of a sudden, when I had a ManagingEditor.com email, and I had, you know, this new, pretty platform that felt really neutral and friendly and community based, people were knocking on the door. And that felt so exciting. It felt like we were able to be part of a conversation and to lead a conversation in a way that we hadn't been before.

- Lee: [05:59](#) And, I mean, partly the lesson for me is that power of just brand and marketing, right? Because we really were doing similar work. It was similar content. We had just really changed the way we were talking about it and the way we were thinking about it. And we had, instead of trying to tweak something old, we just completely started over with a new name, a new idea, a new tagline, and it was so much better.
- Mary: [06:20](#) I would also say, you know, that this wasn't without a cost-benefit analysis, right? Like it wasn't just, "Hey, let's make this thing," so one, it did cost a lot of money. I had to buy the domain. We invested in building a new website.
- Mary: [06:31](#) The other that we had to make a decision on is like, "Can..." we had years of content built up on Rep Cap, right? On that agency blog. It brought us traffic, so we had to make the decision to walk away from that history with Google too. And that was like... I felt that was the part that really felt like burning it down to me, was like we had the site that was getting, you know, 10,000 views a month, and like had this whole library of content. And it was like, "Okay, I'm just gonna throw this away."
- Lee: [06:56](#) Right, I mean, for marketers, that's gold to have... What did we have? Probably six years of content built up?
- Mary: [07:02](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Lee: [07:02](#) Um, we had been blogging since the early days of blogging online, and we, we trashed it all. And I think part of what this speaks to is, you know, we're not in the first generation of online content anymore, right? So for a long time, it was like a race to start your blog and then a race to build up your content because Google likes things that have been there for a while.
- Lee: [07:22](#) ANd now, we're reaching a point, I'm seeing it in all different industries, people burning down their old sites, their old content businesses, their old publications, and leaving them behind. And starting over to do something new, and I think what that speaks to is, you know, just doing business as usual, doing what has worked for the past 10 years, doesn't necessarily guarantee success going forward.
- Lee: [07:42](#) I mean, I think most marketers have worked on brands that all of a sudden, start to tank in traffic, or all of a sudden you realize that, you know, your content you've been publishing for years isn't bringing the same kinds of interest anymore. So my

prediction for the future of marketing is that people are gonna have to burn it all down a lot more frequently.

Mary: [07:59](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative). I agree because I think that there was a time when you could expect a brand... I remember, we used to build websites and you would think that it could last for five years. And then it became they could last for three, and now I think they last about 18 months before they start to look stale.

Mary: [08:13](#) And that's a scary thought, right? Like, but that just means we have to move into truly like a more agile way of thinking about this. And sometimes what agile tells you when you're testing things and working on things is that you have to throw it away, that the whole thing has to go, not just some little bitty tweak.

Lee: [08:27](#) Right. And I think that, I think throwing it all away, I mean, that's making a big statement about your content and your platform, your marketing strategy. But I think it also psychologically, it just does a lot for your team, and I think that we have definitely seen that for our team.

Lee: [08:40](#) You know, having a new creative project to work on that felt like it was fresh and exciting and relevant and timely, I think that was worth the investment on its own in some ways, is having a team that's excited to work on something again, instead of just kind of propping up something old that we're trying to keep going.

Mary: [08:57](#) So I think another part of this too, is if that disruption's gonna come for you, right? Like there's two ways to think about disruption and one is like you wait to be forced to do it, right? People talk about the burning platform that you're forced to jump off of that your business... You can see that your business is about to fall apart.

Mary: [09:12](#) But to me, the healthier way to think about this, is to be proactive, and look out and think like, "Okay, what's gonna fall apart for me here?" Like, "What's gonna put me out of business?" Like, "How can I plan for this now? How can I go ahead and disrupt myself?"

Mary: [09:25](#) And when I look back on it, you know, I really think that was when we took a big leap and took a risk in disrupting ourselves. And I think that since we've launched it, we've continued to build on that, right? And I would say those things that we've done are more iterative, right? Like where we've added to the brand like with this podcast, for example. Or where we've

added, you know, the, the online events that we're doing under the brand.

- Mary: [09:45](#) But, fundamentally, like none of those new, fresh iterative things that are working for us so well would have any impact, wouldn't be possible if we hadn't done the big leap of building the Managing Editor site to start with, and abandoning the old site.
- Lee: [09:59](#) Right, it opened up new doors for us. I mean, you're listening to one of them. We felt like we were able to start a podcast on this new brand platform, and it's been a really fun learning experience for us. And Managing Editor, the whole ecosystem everything we've done under that brand, I started to think of it as our laboratory. It's, it's where we innovate. It's where we try out new things.
- Lee: [10:16](#) As a marketing agency, it's so important to have kind of that innovation space where you can mess up and make mistakes and try crazy things. I mean, we've done everything under Managing Editor, from try to make a crowd source Spotify playlist that we thought it might be fun. No one cared. We have run both small events and big online events. We've learned a ton from those. We've brought in new people to our community. We've tested new ways to talk about content to promote it online
- Lee: [10:45](#) It's given everyone on our agency team new ways to experiment without the risk of failing on client work, so I think the lesson for me they are whether you're at an agency or in-house business is, you know, you need to create spaces where you can test and innovate. And you need to have laboratory projects because usually it's where your best ideas will develop.
- Mary: [11:06](#) And sometimes you just gotta burn it down.
- Lee: [11:09](#) So it's one thing to make a business decision to burn something down and start over, but what if you're burning down a creative project that you've invested a lot of your personal time in? What if you're burning down work that you're really passionate about?
- Lee: [11:31](#) Writer Alison Pittaway had been working for five years on a manuscript that was really personal and emotional. It was about recovering from an abusive relationship. Her goal in writing the book was to help others who are in the same situation. She

cared a lot about making sure this book came to life, but she was also completely stuck.

- Allison Pittawa: [11:51](#) I would say, in my case I was writing a book, uh, it had been in the planning stages for five years. I had written some notes I had an outline that I wanted to follow. Uh, everything was going really well until I actually started to write the actual content, and I just, I just found that I was just getting in a mess.
- Allison Pittawa: [12:10](#) I just could not get clear on how this thing was gonna flow, and I kept going, kept going until I had like, I think about 126, 130 pages. And then one day I just got so upset with it. I just thought, "This just is not working. I'm just gonna scrap it. I'm just gonna... In fact, I'm not even gonna do this book anymore. I'm just gonna leave it, and I obviously wasn't meant to do it, so that's it."
- Allison Pittawa: [12:36](#) And it was a couple weeks later it ca- it just kept nagging at the back of my head that this is something I have to do. And a couple weeks later, I'd sort of sat down at the computer, and I started to write again. And this new stuff just flowed out of me.
- Lee: [12:53](#) Do you think that that time away from just drilling away at the content and trying to get it done, to have then reflection and maybe just to think about it in new ways, do you think that's what really helped you kind of breakthrough?
- Allison Pittawa: [13:04](#) Absolutely, absolutely. And I-I-I've actually made a note that taking a break from something like that... When you get to that point of pure frustration, taking a break from it is so important. Often times, you can't take a two week break when you're writing a book perhaps, or, or some kind of long form content. Maybe you do have the luxury of time.
- Allison Pittawa: [13:23](#) But if it's an article for a client, you don't have the luxury of being, being able to take two weeks, but you can, say, put it down for to day. Pick it up again in the morning. And I think it's important to, to create a distance between yourself and whatever that frustration is and I think taking a break is, is a really good way of doing that.
- Lee: [13:42](#) So what ended up happening? So did you write it in a completely different way? Where are you now with the work?
- Allison Pittawa: [13:48](#) I did, I did. Well, I'm almost done. I've almost finished the first manuscript, and it's taken me literally three months. I-I mean, that's sounds, you know, five years to three months, it sounds

unbelievable. But it is true because I guess really that five years was five years of preparation, but it wasn't just about preparing the book.

- Allison Pittawa: [14:09](#) It was about preparing me because this for me was an important piece of writing, and I think for anyone who's doing important piece of writing like that. There is a process to it. There is a process of the creative process, but that's also the, your own process of going through, you know, the creation of this, uh, this, this part of you.
- Allison Pittawa: [14:30](#) But interestingly, if I could just mention this, I was talking to artist friend of mine and she said, uh, we were talking about this very subject, and she said it's the same in, in art when somebody's creating a, a piece of sculpture or a, a painting. She said often amateur artists or people who are new to this big creation process get to a point where all they've created is a mess, and that's when they give up. That's when they stop and they think, "Oh, I c- I c-can't do this. I'm, I'm no good. This is..." you know, they lose confidence.
- Allison Pittawa: [15:01](#) And she actually teaches people artists to get over that, uh, situation, to actually go through the mess so... Because when you get to the other side of the mass, there is the building process, and that's much easier. I mean, if you think about remodeling a, a room, it starts off with a room that's okay. It's livable in, but you don't like it, so what do you do?
- Allison Pittawa: [15:25](#) You tear down walls, you take paper off the walls, you, you create a mess, but you have to do that to get to the point where you can start to rebuild what you actually want. You know, to change and chimney breast, move it somewhere else, you know, rebuild a wall or, or take another wall down. Whatever it is you need to do to that room.
- Allison Pittawa: [15:43](#) So yeah. I think it's a healthy process to be honest. The main thing, this is so important, the main thing for me, and I, and I think this applies universally, is do not read, do not go back and read what you've written.
- Lee: [15:56](#) (laughs).
- Allison Pittawa: [15:57](#) Just don't and, and that's counter intuitive because we think to ourselves, "But I've spent so much time writing this content. I don't throw that in the bin. I don't want to waste it." Believe me it's not wasted.

Allison Pittawa: [16:09](#) Uh, the other thing that you mustn't do is throw anything away. I mean, we live in the digital age where it's very easy to save things on computer and not delete them or put them in the trash. Do that. Save it your computer because there will be a time in the future when you can go back and read that stuff, and there will be snippets in there that come up, that maybe put you on, set you on the path of a new creation, a new piece of writing or piece of work.

Allison Pittawa: [16:35](#) But, at this point in time, when you've come to the point of realizing that you just got his holy mess, please do not read it (laughing). It just will stop you in your tracks. It will halt the creative process. I tried it and [inaudible 00:16:49]

Lee: [16:48](#) You'll get back in that swirl again.

Allison Pittawa: [16:50](#) Yeah.

Lee: [16:51](#) Yeah.

Allison Pittawa: [16:51](#) Exactly, so that's the most important thing.

Lee: [16:54](#) That's good. That's good advise 'cause I can see people thinking, "Maybe I'll kind of get inspired for what new angle I could go in. Let me just look back what I did before," right? But you're saying no way.

Allison Pittawa: [17:03](#) No (laughing). No, please.

Lee: [17:04](#) So you spent five years working on something that you didn't end up using. Did you feel any grief over that? Like what, what did you feel about letting that go?

Allison Pittawa: [17:12](#) I felt, uh, loads of emotions. I-I was scared. I mean, this is visceral fear came up for me. It was like, "How can I just let go of this stuff and start from scratch again? It's, I-I can't afford another five years." But at same time, I was relieved because when I started, uh, writing, I j- it just felt so easy. It just flowed so easily, and it started to come together in, in a way that was, had the right shape.

Allison Pittawa: [17:38](#) It, it was following the outline that I'd created. Initially, it was, it was meaningful. It actually flowed really well, and it, it was just easy. So after the initial fear, I started to feel relief. And then I started to feel really energized and motivated and just to, to, to get on, get it, get it done.

- Allison Pittawa: [17:57](#) But initially, and this I think is what's hard for people, initially, you really have to push yourself to start again because it's, you know, and j-just put one foot in front of the other.
- Allison Pittawa: [18:07](#) I went trekking the Himalayas a few years ago, which was a fabulous, wonderful experience, and, um, it's quite high up there. And the altitude is, you know, makes you feel bad, and I was feeling particularly bad on this one particular day. And the, the, uh, Sherpa who was guiding us said, "Just put one foot in front of the other." And I thought, and I use that as a mantra. And I still do when things get difficult for me now, I just think, you know, "Just keep going. Just one foot in front of the other. Don't stop."
- Allison Pittawa: [18:33](#) So I think there is a point after you burnt it all down, prior to the excitement and motivation coming, where you really do have to push yourself.
- Lee: [18:42](#) Yeah, just keep going. No, that's, that's good advice. That's good for a lot of different things in life, not just creative project, right? (laughs).
- Allison Pittawa: [18:49](#) Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- Lee: [18:51](#) Aw, I love that. Is there anything else you wanna share about kind of burning it down, and what it meant for you or what you've learned from it now?
- Allison Pittawa: [18:58](#) Yeah, it's, it... A lot of times we get stuck in creative processes because a lot of us have this perfectionism, perfectionistic outlook, especially in jobs like ours Lee, where clients expect us to dot the Is and cross the Ts. And we have to be, to do everything perfectly.
- Allison Pittawa: [19:16](#) And I think that gets... When, when we're talking about the creative process, I think that need for perfectionism really does get in the way because when you're creating something, you have to be prepared to create imperfect writing, imperfect art, imperfect sculptures. Whatever it is you're doing, you have to be prepared to make a mess.
- Mary: [19:45](#) Another way to think about the idea of burning it all down, is a popular business buzzword, disruption. That means when something isn't working, it's time to come up with a radical new idea. Like if you're competing with a huge sea of identical companies, do something completely different.

Mary: [20:00](#) At the same time though, being a disruptor in your day-to-day work can be completely exhausting, so how do you know when it's time to push back and went to burn it all down? And when should you just sit back, be patient and keep moving with the status quo?

Mary: [20:13](#) I brought this question to Charlene Li. She's been thinking about and studying disruption in business for years. I've been following her work since the early days of my career back when I was at the Washington Post and at Smart Brief.

Mary: [20:25](#) She's got a new book out called The Disruption Mindset that gets into why some organizations manage to transform themselves while others fall apart. Let's hear what Charlene has to say.

Mary: [20:36](#) So what was the inspiration for this book.

Charlene Li: [20:39](#) I had been talking about disruption, in fact my [purpose 00:20:42] statement is, "I help leaders and organizations thrive through disruption." And someone called me on it, like, "So how do you do this?" I'm like, "I actually don't know all the details. I can't put it into a big picture framework." So I said, "I should do research on it."

Charlene Li: [20:56](#) And the result of it is this book. I've been looking at this and diving into it for about three years, actively writing it for the past... And I really wanted an answer to, "How do you actually disrupt yourself? I mean, systematically do it?"

Charlene Li: [21:10](#) And I talked to companies that I felt were an example of this, and their not just the usual suspects. It's not the Ubers and the Googles of the world. It's consulting firms, it's health care companies, it's, could be a bank, even. And I wanted to dig into that messy process of how they actually disrupt [inaudible 00:21:30].

Mary: [21:30](#) I think that people throw this word around a lot. Like we talk about disruption, we talk about disruptive transformation, like how do you define that term?

Charlene Li: [21:39](#) Well, I-I think the simple way is that it's painful. So it wouldn't (laughing)... If it's not disruptive... If it's not painful, then it's not disruptive. But more than anything else, I-I think disruption results in growth, and it's actually the growth itself that is disruptive.

- Charlene Li: [21:54](#) And that was a really interesting finding. And that the major reason why people don't pursue disruptive transformation is because it does require [inaudible 00:22:04] itself is highly, highly disruptive. It's hard to grow. You have to change things substantially, and when you change things, relationship, the power relationship inside your organization, the relationship with your partner, the ecosystem even with your customers, fundamentally changes.
- Charlene Li: [22:20](#) And when relationships are in flux, people start feeling really uncomfortable, and they don't like going there. So they lack the reason to go forward and that's the reason for disruption. You can kinda see a path forward, but if it's too hard, they'll just step back on that. So I think of disruption not as a technology, but more as this mental state which is why I call it Disruption Mindset that some groups of organizations [inaudible 00:22:45] very comfortable living in that state and others don't.
- Mary: [22:47](#) So I think one of the things that I was [inaudible 00:22:49] as I was reading your book, which is very good, by the way. I was thinking about like how agile has pushed us all to think about things as being incremental. Like, okay, just, just build it and then keep improving, keep improving, but it's a very incremental type improvement. And you talk about Big Gulp changes, right?
- Mary: [23:09](#) So like, what's a Big Gulp change to you?
- Charlene Li: [23:12](#) Well, I, I like to say, first of all, that agile isn't a strategy. It is just one of the processes that gets you to that point, and when you think that agile's the way to move forward, well, what are you moving forward toward?
- Charlene Li: [23:23](#) So Big Gulp, disruptive strategy and [inaudible 00:23:27] objective and ones where you're really looking far out into the future. YOu're seeing where your customers are going to be, and because of that, you take a hard look at what you're doing today and go, "I-it's not gonna make it. I'm not gonna get there doing what we're doing today, incrementally getting to that point. We're going to have to make a big, drastic change in order to make this new future come true."
- Charlene Li: [23:49](#) So that's when Big Gulp's [happening 00:23:52], just kinda like, "Man, here's reality staring me in the face. I gotta make these decisions, or resign myself to being a victim of disruption."

- Mary: [23:59](#) And how are we supposed to make those Big Gulp changes in reality? You know, what if we're doing it backwards? According to Charlene, we might just be.
- Charlene Li: [24:08](#) Well, we keep looking for some shiny object, some magical item, (laughs). I think of it as, "Show me the easy button, so I can press it." (laughs). And the reality is that, you keep looking for the disruption that's going to drive growth. And when it's presented to you, you go, "Wait, that's too hard. I don't want to do that because that growth is going to be disruptive," and that's we're looking at it backwards. It's growth that is disruptive.
- Charlene Li: [24:32](#) So if you look for an element in your business that will drive growth, those are the things that are going to be disruptive. And when I look at an example of, um, let's say T-Mobile is my opening story. They had a strategy of being the un-carrier, and it's basically a branding positioning. But it was so much more than that. They changed everything in the way that they did their business. From the way that they talk to customers, to the way they sold, they even changed the CEO.
- Charlene Li: [24:58](#) And what I found was that the disruptive part here was being absolutely consistent about this new future they wanted to craft. To change everything that they did, they questioned everything, from the way they hire to the way they did, um, their contracts, and this is the big hallmark of the un-carrier strategy.
- Charlene Li: [25:16](#) So it was much more than just a simple little thing, and it involved no new technology, no new talent or new way of doing their business other than everything that they did oriented towards the customer. They just changed the entire way the business ran.
- Charlene Li: [25:34](#) So that was a disruptive part. It wasn't easy for them. They had to retrain themselves on how to do this and be 100% committed to making that change, so when they did that, that was their Big Gulp moments. Like, "Okay, this is how we're gonna take on the big guys and, and be relevant to our customer.
- Mary: [25:49](#) That takes some really, I guess, sort of n- How can I describe this? Like the leadership skills that that requires to transform a culture. I mean this is something you've also written about a ton and talked about a ton, but like how do you, as a leader, take an organization, I mean, the size of like a T-Mobile, right? I mean, I

know they were a, the, a s-smaller carrier then, but it was still thousands of people. Like how do you do that?

- Charlene Li: [26:13](#) I-I think again, it was an interesting insight between them and also Adobe, that executive team was really tight. I, again, the T-Mobile team had gone through this horrendous experience, uh, trying to do a merger with AT&T, and they got completely killed off, uh, by the government.
- Charlene Li: [26:29](#) So they're sitting there going like, "Well, what do we do now?" But because they had been together for years and gone through this experience, they could pretty much say anything to each other. And so they were really open and very committed to the strategy once they decided on it.
- Charlene Li: [26:43](#) Adobe was the same thing. Their executive team had worked for at least five years all together as a unit, and so when they came out with this very controversial strategy, of going from packaged software to the cloud for the Creative Suite, they'd never break despite customers signing a huge petition that they didn't want this. Employees, they didn't want it, uh, having to go to the stock market, you know, Wall Street, and say, "We're gonna lose money for the next two years. This is great news."
- Charlene Li: [27:13](#) So they, they never blinked through all of that. And I-I think it's this strong vision. Again, I keep coming back to what keeps a disruptive organization together through all of these tough times is a really strong vision of what the future looks like because otherwise, you would never, ever make the sacrifices of today for that future.
- Charlene Li: [27:36](#) And what T-Mobile leadership did, what Adobe leadership did, what all of these fantastic leaders said, you know, "This is what's at stake. This is what the future customer experience is. That's the potential that we can go after. So let's take that big gulp, change the things we have to do today because that future is worth fighting for."
- Mary: [27:53](#) You know, you talk about collaboration a lot too. Like the idea that inov- And people think disruption, innovation, there's this lone genius over here coming up with ideas and dropping 'em on the world, but that's not how it actually works is it?
- Charlene Li: [28:04](#) It never works that way because in order to create a disruptive transformation, you need the entire organization. And this lone person who comes up with a great idea, has this wonderful change mindset, but doesn't, isn't paired with the leadership

ability to pull everybody else long term, inspire and empower people to take action. They're just waving their hands.

- Charlene Li: [28:26](#) I call the Agent Provocateur. They're waving their hands and saying a lot of things, but nothing ever gets done. And I-I do believe that true disruptive transformation happens when you create exponential change. So that's a leadership skill that requires not only that incredible change mindset, that incredible optimism, but also they have to be realists. I call them realist optimists because they can see the reality like, "Okay, this is where we are today, and we want to get to that future, I'm gonna have to lead all of these people into this unknown world and inspire them and motivate them and keep them going. And then we create a movement, so that we can get this thing done."
- Charlene Li: [29:06](#) That's a very different type of leadership, and it's very rare to see, but I think there's a lot of people who have that capability. They just may not necessarily be putting it towards the direction of creating disruptive growth.
- Mary: [29:18](#) So how do we do that? I guess that'll be my last question for you with the time we have today. Like how, how do we reposition ourselves? Like if we can take one step, you know, two steps, three steps like to reposition ourselves for disruptive growth, what should we do?
- Charlene Li: [29:31](#) I think the first one is to sets your sights on the future. To take, take the time, dedicate some resources to saying, "What is the future we want to build?" Because unless you have that step, that future customer, that future in mind, you can't begin to say, "This is why we should disrupt ourselves." So think about that strategy, focus on your future customer.
- Charlene Li: [29:50](#) The second thing is, if you're going to leave those, you're going to have to create a movement. We as leaders don't think ourselves as movement makers, but that is exactly what you have to do because you, you realize that moving opposite to today's status quo into the future is going to be incredibly hard, both for the organization and frankly, personally, in that, in terms of how feel about this. So we need a sense of being part of a movement to keep us going along, and to inspire other leaders to join the movement too.
- Charlene Li: [30:20](#) And the third one is start thinking about how you need to change your culture. Culture is just made up of beliefs and behaviors. So look at the beliefs that you have inside your organization today, and, and think really hard, what are the

beliefs that are holding you back? You personally, but also in your organization, your team. And put those, literally, write them on pieces of Post-It notes, put 'em on the wall, and then agree, "We're not gonna believe these things anymore. We're not gonna act in those, these ways anymore."

- Charlene Li: [30:45](#) But just as importantly, write new beliefs and behaviors that are going to take you into that future. And agree that, "This is how we're going to act. This is what we're gonna say to each other," and reinforce that with, uh, your [prophecies 00:30:58], your organization, the stories you tell each other, like ritual. Because the only way you're going to change your culture to be focused on the future customer, is if you systematically replace the beliefs and behaviors that are holding you back with ones that'll move you forward.
- Mary: [31:19](#) One of my favorite disruptors is my friend Elena Valentine. She's a co-founder of Skill Scout which uses video to capture and share our real human stories in the workplace. Some of you may be familiar with Skill Scout though, what you may not know is that this iteration of the company was not the first. In fact, Elena and her partners blew up the first version of Skill Scout practically out of the gate.
- Elena Valentine: [31:41](#) Oh, we literally had to burn it down. It was being forced on us to burn it down. I mean, our first business literally failed within months, and there were a myriad of reasons why that happened. But I think, inevitably, it needed to be done for a couple of reasons.
- Elena Valentine: [32:00](#) One is, we were going in a completely different direction, so when we started Skill Scout, this was supposed to be a workforce development platform for young people, mentors, AKA those in the community that are providing training opportunities and businesses. So it was gonna be this three sided marketplace that had engaging video, that had a variety of different stuff to it.
- Elena Valentine: [32:29](#) And quite frankly it just wasn't working, and I think in part it's, it's because the way that it was positioned. And because despite the fact that companies wanna say they care about social impact and, you know, want to hire youth that, you know, may have barriers to employment, it's clear that their decisions and like what they were doing in action was very much not the case.
- Elena Valentine: [32:55](#) And that if we really were going to make social impact it was going to be because we were gonna create a platform and position ourselves as being initially a, a platform or community

that just had viable talent generally. That we were here to just help companies attract, retain, hire talent through hands on skill assessments, showcasing videos, et cetera, regardless of any barriers to employment, be it that young people or any candidates had.

- Elena Valentine: [33:23](#) So that was a huge pivot for us in the beginning, and it was important for that first, first business to fail for us to really start fresh.
- Mary: [33:32](#) So I wanna take you back to that moment, okay? Because I'm at you after all this happened. I kind of knew who you were, but like I met you after you had reinvented this business (laughing). So you are one of the most positive, like optimistic people I have ever met in my life, right? So like I'm trying to imagine the moment where you and your... It was Abby, right? Your co-founder Abby, and then was there another partner involved in that time?
- Elena Valentine: [33:58](#) Yeah, at the time there were a couple of different folks in the kitchen, and so as result of the break in this business, it was also a decision break in partnerships, which at the time was also a very important thing to do in order for, I think, all of us to follow what we really thought needed to be done in a marketplace.
- Elena Valentine: [34:20](#) So, you know, there was a group of us that are doing amazing things, you know, based on their passions and experience, and then there was another group that did something else. So I would say, you know, other reasons why we burn things down is a result of, you know, the relationships that we have with personnel and with folks in our business.
- Elena Valentine: [34:39](#) You know, business breakups happen all the time. That is a huge reason why be it a product, a service or a business itself needs to be burn down because it's no longer fit between leaders or between colleagues.
- Mary: [34:54](#) Hm, so take me back to that moment though, Miss Perpetual Optimist. There was a moment somewhere in there were you realize, where you decided that like this was it. "I gotta, I gotta, I gotta stop this." Like do you remember where you were? Do you remember that moment?
- Elena Valentine: [35:08](#) Yeah, it was my birthday. I think I was 29 or 30, and I could barely sleep and barely eat. Abby was equally going through the same kind of feelings, and we had to get in a call with our partners to share why this couldn't work. So it was a mix both of

I think what we all thought needed in the marketplace. Quite frankly, all of our backs were against the wall, um, when it came to funding, so that was huge.

- Elena Valentine: [35:43](#) And, you know, it, it just came down to whether or not all of us felt like we could work together. Um, and I remember specifically, you know, we were on a phone call and Abby and I were almost like a hiding behind our mentor. It was at the time when we couldn't even... Felt like we didn't even have the courage to have difficult conversations. That's where we were over five or six years ago.
- Elena Valentine: [36:05](#) I mean Abby and I were freaking out. Didn't know how to communicate. I'm journaling just trying to figure how I, you know, articulate, you know, what we're supposed to do next. It was nerve wracking, and so yes. I hid behind my mentor, as he had to have the difficult conversation of what was going to happen next. And once that conversation happened and the air was cleared, we all could move on.
- Elena Valentine: [36:33](#) There was a sense of relief after all of this happened. There was a sense of optimism, but there was also a huge, huge sense of urgency, uh, because we needed to figure out very quickly how we make money and how we pay ourselves, or we couldn't do this.
- Mary: [36:51](#) Wow. (laughs). And now you're really good at having difficult conversations, so was that just like a breakthrough for you? After that you were like, "I got this."
- Elena Valentine: [36:59](#) No, it took another, it probably took another two years (laughs). I think, and in part, realizing that, you know, as, as the CEO and, and, and if we're gonna grow, I have to be comfortable with uncomfortable conversations and with ambiguity. And quite frankly, maybe having people not like me, which I think it's something that many people, particularly women, really struggle with. It's something I still struggle with
- Elena Valentine: [37:23](#) But yeah. It took me a very long time to get comfortable, but that's the only way that we can grow. It's the only way that I can grow as a leader, but it's, it's the only way that I can make this business successful.
- Mary: [37:35](#) We've all seen what happens when our dreams collide with reality. Sometimes it's not pretty. Sometimes it's really frustrating. There's a lot we can learn from those awful

moments. Elena and I discussed just how important it is for all of us to get punched in the mouth every once in a while.

Elena Valentine: [37:50](#) I'd love to say that everyone should follow their dreams and that, you know, when you are able to tap-in what you love to do, you never work a day in your life. But the truth is, is that we have families, some of us are breadwinners in our families and money absolutely matters.

Elena Valentine: [38:07](#) And so I think the reason why I can stand here today is, you know, Abby and I absolutely had to, not only make a mi-commitment to each other, but just for our families, that very quickly we had to figure out a way to make money, period. And sometimes we could build these, these ideas that we were extremely passionate about, and others were like, "No. Well, look. We have to make money. This is what businesses are paying for and so let's figure out a way to do it." I mean, that, that really was the main truth.

Elena Valentine: [38:35](#) So I guess when someone saying, "Hey, this is not working. How long should I do it?" I mean, that is such... That is so subjective. The, the question is, "Well, how much runway do you have?" A lot of the things I say, especially for tech startups, is "If your technology went away today, really like poof, begone." Like "Your applicant tracking system, or your platform is dead. How would you make money tomorrow? If you still were forced make money without the technology what, would you do?"

Elena Valentine: [39:03](#) And that, in essence, then becomes the MVP. That becomes then, the essential piece that you have that you should be leaning into. And if you don't have that... So if you can't answer that, "This is how I could make money tomorrow," then yeah maybe the decision needs to be at this point, unless you can get an influx of cash, this may have to be something that you walk away from.

Mary: [39:23](#) So it's funny, that actually is how my business wound up s-getting started. I-I actually got laid off, right? I got laid off from a job that I love in the middle of that, of my divorce, so it was totally messy. And I'm like, "Oh my God. Okay, so what am I gonna do to like feed us?" And there... You're right. There was like such a sense of urgency about it.

Mary: [39:39](#) A-and I had a client in... I had my first client in three weeks, and I had another one like three weeks later. And then I signed a massive one like within six weeks, you know? So I think there was urgency. I think the urgency, you know, like I say, they talk about burning platforms, but for me there was a real sense of

urgency, every time, when I started the business which is a big pivot in my career. And I when I, when I left journalism basically, right? I made that decision, and when I left...

- Mary: [40:04](#) I mean, yeah. There's just been... There's always been that sense of urgency. Like I had no... There was no way back. There was no, there was no alternative, I think. I-I couldn't be, could just sit there and be comfy.
- Elena Valentine: [40:14](#) Yeah, and I think inevitably that's... First of all, there's a reason why not everyone's an entrepreneur 'cause there is such this sense of discomfort of risk of anxiety, right? Like, you know, the rite of passage for any entrepreneur is absolutely, yes, Point of exhaustion, being kept up at night, working really long hours.
- Elena Valentine: [40:35](#) The reason why famous business people can write the books they have, and Arianna Huffington can write about, you know, balance is because she had to hit rock bottom first to recognize her boundaries. And so when I, when I think about that when I, when I think about your story, when I think about ours, so much of this has to do with the level of risk anxiety we're able to take. But there's that such sense of urgency, you know, for you, yes.
- Elena Valentine: [41:00](#) I mean, for you it was, "I-I have to feed this child in two weeks," and mama bear comes out. It's, a-and it's like, it's almost by any means necessary, and it's like, like... And I think part of it, right, is sometimes, you know, when we have these early businesses, I'm, I was one for this too. I'm sure you two, you were the same way, where it's like, "Oh, you know, this business want us to do something but it doesn't quite fit into our model. So, you know, we're not gonna take it," or like there's this idea that it's like there's this tunnel vision of, "Well, this is the model that we have. This is the model that we have." As opposed to saying, "You know what? The first two years is gonna just be a lot of saying yes in doing things that at first maybe don't feel right, but number one get us paid. But oh, by the way there's some pretty cool insights here after we've done this about what we could include to expand the model that actually meets the needs of customers."
- Mary: [41:50](#) I absolutely did that. My only goal for the first year was to make enough money to support me and [Rini 00:41:55]. That was it. That was the goal that was like, "Can I make enough money so that we have safe housing, nutritious food, and health insurance?" (laughs). Like that was it. That was all I had (laughing).

Mary: [42:05](#) And it was fine. It worked out fine. I did say... You know, you say yes to things and you start to like call things away. You know, you start to pare things off, and I mean, I'd say now... So when you talk about the model, one of the things that made me... It made me think about one of my favorite quotes from Mike Tyson which is that, "Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."

Elena Valentine: [42:20](#) Yes!

Mary: [42:20](#) (laughs). Like, right? Like, you know what you're going to do, right, when you step into the ring. Well, right up until somebody punches you in the mouth, and then you're going to figure out what you're really gonna do. And I feel like, I feel like we get punched in the mouth, like as an entrepreneur if you not getting punched in the mouth at least every six months, like you're not doing this right.

Elena Valentine: [42:37](#) Oh, absolutely not.

Mary: [42:38](#) I know, like... (laughing).

Elena Valentine: [42:39](#) No, it doesn't matter how good you are because, you know, you're not growing unless you get punched in the mouth. Because, okay, look you get punched in the mouth and it's like "Okay, well..." That's how they readjust. That's how they readjust, right?

Elena Valentine: [42:52](#) I mean, I'm a huge fan of boxing-

Mary: [42:53](#) I know. (laughs).

Elena Valentine: [42:53](#) So you just hit my major, major love language, right. It's like-

Mary: [42:57](#) I did not realize that. That's really funny, but I love that quote. I- I said that even to my older daughter the other day too where... And she just like looked at me, and was like, "Really Mom?" And I'm like, "Am I wrong? Is Mike Tyson wrong? He is not wrong." Like, you know... (laughing).

Mary: [43:10](#) This is everybody got a plan. (laughs).

Elena Valentine: [43:12](#) I mean, I mean, yeah. I mean, it's always like yeah. You can, you can take as much school, you can read as much as you can about entrepreneurship and building a business, but the only way that you gonna learn is by, is by failing, is by these burning down moments, right?

- Elena Valentine: [43:26](#) And we hate when we're there, right? Like they're, o-or not even hate, it's like sometimes it's, it's so visceral and, and so much is happening, that you can't even recognize that you're just going through this hellish moment. But those are the biggest moments that you learn from, so all of the pivots, all the burning downs, this is what great businesses are made of.
- Lee: [43:55](#) So this is the first episode of a new season of this podcast, so it's something new and exciting. But this is also the final chapter for me. This is my last episode as the host of this podcast. I'm burning it down, and I'm making a transition in my career too.
- Lee: [44:12](#) Mary Ellen, we have worked together for seven years at our content marketing agency Rep Cap and we worked together at Smart Brief before that, so we have a long history of collaborating together. And it's been really fun. We've both learned a lot, but in the spirit of burning it down, it's time for me to take a new path. And I'm gonna go out on my own.
- Lee: [44:32](#) Like I said, we've worked together doing content marketing for companies for seven years, and over that seven years, as I'm sure all of you listening have noticed, things have changed a lot. Content marketing has evolved a ton, and for me, it's time to approach this work from a slightly different angle. And a problem that I'm seeing is that so many companies are publishing so much. There's a frenzy around needing to get content out, but I think a lot of that content isn't effective. And we're having a hard time talking about the results because we're not doing enough thinking about the ideas that we're trying to get out into the market.
- Lee: [45:07](#) We're focusing on the execution and maybe not enough on the message and the big ideas that we want to sell. So that's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna help visionary companies and leaders dig up their big ideas, craft their message and make a plan to take it into the market.
- Lee: [45:22](#) So I'm gonna be focusing on that. You'll still hear my voice sometimes on the Margins podcast, and you'll probably still see me around the Managing Editor website. But if you wanna checkout what I'm doing going forward, you can visit my website. Its LeePricIdeas.com. I'm starting a new newsletter over there, so if you wanna come along and watch as I figure out how to build something new (laughing), and think about the future of thought leadership, that's where you can find me.
- Lee: [45:48](#) And Mary Ellen, I wanted to say thanks for including me on this really fun and wild ride. We've had so much fun making this

podcast and launching Managing Editor as our favorite side project. So thanks for having me.

- Mary: [46:01](#) Thank you for everything that you've done to help this build this business and get us to where we are. This is a bitter, sweet moment for me. I think as I lot of times these transitions are for people, which is something I think we don't talk about enough. Like I am both sad to see you go and also incredibly excited to see what you're gonna build, so thanks for everything you've done and I wish you the best of luck.
- Lee: [46:20](#) And if you have any experience burning it down or starting something new, I'm in a mode right now where I'm looking for advice f-from anyone and everyone, so if you have advice for me on starting my own solo business or working in thought leadership or if you just wanna talk about kind of the crazy world of content marketing, I would love to chat. Please reach out.
- Mary: [46:44](#) So that's it for this episode of Margins by Managing Editor. You can find us on iTunes, Stitcher or wherever you listen to podcasts. Subscribe to hear more about our deep dive this season into the creative process, and if you like what you hear, don't hesitate to share us with your friends and rate us on your favorite platform. And if you wanna hear more from the Managing Editor team, so there's an easy way to do that. We send and email every Friday morning, and you can join the club at ManagingEditor.com/Subscribe.
- Mary: [47:12](#) I'd also like to give a special thanks to the rest of the team that helped make this episode. Our producer Rex New and our audio editor Marty [McPatten 00:47:20]. Thanks. We'll see you next time.