

Is Strategic Thinking Your Comfort Zone or Danger Zone?

with Carla Johnson

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Narrator: Why do some companies stand out while others seem to merely show up? That's what we'll explore with leaders across multiple industries to hear how they're creating better experiences by design. And now your host, Susan Quinn.

Susan Quinn: Today I'm joined by Carla Johnson, who's an innovation architect and also a best-selling author, and she's here to remind us that strategic thinking isn't reserved for just a select few at the top of your organization— it's a mindset that anyone can develop. Because when we move beyond tactical plans and we stay curious, incredibly curious, we're gonna open the door to breakthrough thinking that's gonna spur growth. That's the kind of shift that is gonna help your firm truly stand out.

Carla, welcome to Better Experiences by Design. I am delighted to have you as a guest today.

Carla Johnson: Thanks so much, Susan. It's great to see you again. Great to catch up.

Susan Quinn: Well, you are with us today because you were a powerful speaker at a conference I attended earlier this year. And it's one of my favorite subjects around how do you remain curious and innovative, and I know we'll dig into a lot of that. And you have an impressive resume, and you've written a million books.

Carla Johnson: [Laughter]

Susan Quinn: And just give our listeners a sense of the wonderful guest that we have on today.

Carla Johnson: You know, think if there's one thing that really summarized my history and how everything that I've done has come together is I had a friend who said, what do you get if you cross Frank Lloyd Wright, the architect, with Lady Gaga? You get Carla Johnson because she's an innovation architect.

Susan Quinn: [Laughter]

Carla Johnson: It's like that perfect Zen diagram of the very right-brained and the very left-brained and executionary and big thinking and how it all comes into play, and that really breaks the status quo thinking that we tend to get into when things are going right and we're just wanting to keep things going. And, it took a lot of work to get there, so let's just make sure we maintain that direction.

Susan Quinn: Yeah. So just a little bit of background. You've written 10 books. Am I remembering that correctly?

Carla Johnson: I have, yeah, I've written 10 books, and I call myself the accidental author. I did my master's thesis in history, and I had a publisher come to me and say, hey, can I publish your thesis as a book? That opportunity just came to me, and to be honest, I think it was because I was curious. I was so curious about that topic, a very, very niche topic.

And I got excited about it. And my background was marketing, and then I started my own company. And Western Union was one of my first clients, and they came to me and said, hey, we're 155 years old and we're going back to being independently owned—before that, the last person who owned them or company who owned them was First Data,—and they said, we want to tell our story. Can you tell our story? So that was book number two. And it just kind of rolled.

And then, as you said, I'm also a speaker. You know, when you're curious, you try a lot of new things, and it's been a really, really wonderful road that way.

Susan Quinn: So, your 10th book is RE:Think Innovation?

Carla Johnson: Exactly. And I call it R-E colon think innovation because some of us may remember the days when memos came out as paper rather than emails. And it said to colon, from colon, R-E colon, like regarding, what's this about? And so, I did a little play on words there. It's regarding the way we think about innovation and the beliefs we have about what it looks like, who should be doing it, what it costs, how it happens. Does it actually have to be disruptive?

So, it's a challenge and an invitation to people to re-imagine and rethink their own perceptions of what innovation is and can look like for their company.

Susan Quinn: Well, let's jump into that, because you basically gave a perfect summary of what we are going to be discussing today.

We're Circle S Studio, and that S, everyone says, what does the S mean? At the core of it, it's strategy. And as I have learned throughout the decades of work that I've done, you know, you can do anything, but if there isn't a strategic component that you've asked the right questions, otherwise you're busy doing a lot of busy work. But is it actually growing your company?

A typical assignment for us would be going in for a strategic session, and it might be for a three year, five year. There's an agenda, there's pre-work, and one of the assignments is to how can we look at our business differently? I don't know if you've ever experienced this, but sometimes it starts out with a few fun ideas and then it's not unusual that we go back to our regular thinking of, well, we can't do that. We don't have the staff. I think you get the point.

Carla Johnson: Absolutely. Well, holy smokes, you've hit a hot button of mine.

Susan Quinn: [Laughter]

Carla Johnson: And I know I could talk for days about this, but I won't. I think one of the most important things that we have to bring to a strategy session that typical teams don't is that we have to understand and agree on what is it we're trying to accomplish. And when I do strategy

sessions with clients, and if that isn't agreed upon before we come into the room, unfortunately, that's what most of the day is spent doing is let's agree and align on what it is we're trying to accomplish.

So, I've been very lucky in my career to work with some amazing people, including Simon Sinek, who wrote *Start With Why*.

Susan Quinn: I love it.

Carla Johnson: Yeah, absolutely. One of the most so humble, generous people you could ever meet, along with Roy Spence, who wrote a book called *It's Not What You Sell, It's What You Stand For*.

Susan Quinn: Hmm.

Carla Johnson: And when Simon Sinek says, don't read my book, read Roy's book, that to me is a big lesson. And in working with both of them, the biggest lesson that I took away that affects both strategy and our mindset about innovative thinking and trying something new versus getting complacent because what we're doing now is really good and we're satisfied with it, is that they understand what it truly is that the company is trying to accomplish. And that's never, ever what we're trying to sell.

So, when I met Roy, he was working with Motorola at the time that my mentor worked there and brought us together. And so, at the time, Motorola was splitting into two companies. There was the consumer side, which continued the phones and like the headsets that you'd see on the NFL. And then there was the business-to-business side, which was called Motorola Solutions.

And so, if you think about that, like it's very product heavy, like it's an actual tactical product rather than what most of your clients are professional services. But as an example, it would be very easy to say we sell the most technically adept communication products or something like that, but that's not what they did. Their whole message, their why, was that they helped people be better in the moments that matter. And the way they got there was through the equipment that they sell because they helped first responders, teachers, a lot of the people, their customers who bought their products, they were very dependent on those products when in some cases it was a life-or-death situation, and they helped their customers be better.

Now, if you go into a strategy session and you think the difference between, you know, we have a sales goal. We have a revenue goal. Our strategy is how do we sell more? How do we grow the revenue of the business? That's a very, very different conversation than if you go into a strategy session and you say, how do we make our customers be better in the moments that matter? Because one is very tactical and product, and for your audience can be very service driven, like the service offerings. The other one is incredibly aspirational and inspirational.

And what the second one does by focusing on why are we here in business is that all of a sudden mentally and how your brain works on a creative basis, it takes away a whole lot of habitual excuses that we bring to idea sessions. So, I'm sure you've heard some things like this, like, you know, we tried that once, it didn't work. We don't have that kind of budget. That's not how we do things around here. Like that's okay for them because they're that kind of company, but that's not the kind of company that we are. It starts to take those away, and you started to talk about

it a little bit, about how we slide into the ideas and then automatically decide it can't be done. It shifts conversations and strategy sessions away from, 'no, we can't do that because...' to a mindset of, 'yes, that's interesting, and...' And another way we could think about this, and then ideas start to branch off.

Now, one thing that's really important about strategy sessions is I think we have this almost diabolical urge to come out with defined, definite answers that we can immediately put into a spreadsheet, a Gantt chart, a schedule that we can manage the tactical, logistical execution of it. And to be honest, we've been trained like that because we've been trained to produce, right?

Susan Quinn: Yeah.

Carla Johnson: I mean, you're like that as an executive. You are charged with producing a strategy. But one of the things that when we think like that, that we're missing is this opportunity for curiosity because we tend to want to go to ask the questions that make it easy for us to give black and white answers to. Because it makes us feel comfortable, right?

Susan Quinn: Everyone goes pretty quickly to tactical.

Carla Johnson: Exactly.

Susan Quinn: I think that there is a discomfort and in a recent session I actually shared, because I know you have a lot of great questions that you can put in front of people to start that whole, the what if. What if we're curious on that? I still see it's like, okay, let's get on with it. We're a little too much in the woo-woo and this big...

Carla Johnson: We're getting down-, we're going down the rabbit hole. Let's bring it in, right? Let's bring it in.

Susan Quinn: And I don't know how long you see the process taking place, but you hinted at it. I have said before, you know, we will not have all the answers at the end of day one and maybe not day two. And if I were to offer from a strategic lens, I think one of the ways that firms can be more curious and innovative is to give more time to this process.

You start thinking and then if you allow it to evolve and come back to it, maybe you need more data, maybe you need the tactical things to think about it differently. But I will say routinely, this is going to be perhaps uncomfortable for some. And strategy, innovation should hurt a little bit [laughs]. You're going and you're going into what's uncomfortable, what's unknown, the new possibilities. And I don't know if that is something you see. And if so, how do you get people to change that mindset?

Carla Johnson: You know, I think you hit on it with the comfort zone part. And I talked to a lot of executives and it's clear that when they're in their comfort zone, that's quickly gonna turn into their danger zone. Because that feeling of being satisfied with where things are, happy with where we are right now, we've seen how fast the world has changed in the last five years. I mean, a global pandemic, a ship went sideways in a canal, you know disrupted the entire global supply chain. We have Gen Z coming into the workforce. They care more about purpose than they do profit. We have all sorts of different working environments. You know, it was at the office and work from home, then you know hybrid. And many firms still have different types of work styles.

There's different customer expectations. There's expectations about response times and level and quality of customer experience, and even how unique and interesting and quickly interesting that experience is.

I mean, if we're a boomer or Gen X leadership group looking at how do we create a strategy, yet more and more of our customers are Gen Z TikTok users, you can't use a slow, steady, methodical approach for an audience and a buyer that thinks and moves like that. And that's where when you're satisfied where things are at, that can quickly become a danger zone.

And so, I talk about the kinds of questions that we ask in a strategy session. If you think about just a simple compass, you know, it has the north, south, east, west, but I talk about that in terms of the questions we ask can take us in any direction that we want to go. But what we have to do, and especially in a strategy planning session, is we have to be thoughtful about the kinds of questions that we're asking.

I call it the curiosity compass. How do we shift it and use a compass to determine the direction of the questions that we're going to ask? And so, if you think in the West position, I put tactical questions. What's on the opposite end of that? They're very exploratory questions, open ended. In the South position are logical questions or logistical questions about implementation and resources. But the opposite of that are strategic questions.

So, if we look at the kinds of questions we typically ask or are asked, even in a strategy session, just like we just talked, people are more comfortable defaulting to those tactical and logistical questions because they want to know the answers. How will this get done? But if we can come out of a strategy session and know how things will be done, we're selling ourselves short. We're selling our revenue short. We're selling our ability to acquire and serve new clients and customers short. We're selling the experience we're able to deliver to employees and how we recruit them and retain them short. If you come out of a strategy session and have every single answer to every single question, you're not being strategic. You're being tactical and logistical.

Susan Quinn: [Laughter]

Carla Johnson: So how do we shift this? So ideally in a strategy session, we want to be asking the kind of questions that are exploratory and strategic, the opposite of the kind of questions that are tactical and logistical.

So, one of the reasons people like tactical and logistical questions, Susan, is you can look up an answer to them. You can look up a best practice. You can look up a template. You can Google an answer. You can chat GPT it. You can ask an expert, but you can't do that when you start asking questions that are exploratory and strategic. But those are the kinds of questions that will truly serve you when you're in those strategic sessions.

And we go back to our friends, Simon and Roy, you have to ask those kinds of questions to differentiate yourself as a brand, to set yourself apart in a marketplace that for most parts, let's just admit, most accounting firms look the same. Most attorneys, law firms look the same. Most architecture, engineering, construction firms look the same. I do branding for professional services and I had an architecture firm come to me and say we need help with our positioning, so we really stand out. And I said, tell me 10 things that really make you unique and tell me 10 competitors, your top 10 competitors. Interesting thing, you do an audit, they're saying the exact

same thing as their 10 competitors as to what makes them unique. And they said, yeah, but we really are like they're just saying it, but we really are these things.

Susan Quinn: [Laughter]

Carla Johnson: Here's your opportunity instead of just logistically and tactically thinking, how do we prove this, how do we look at a strategic and exploratory way to express this, to create this as a customer journey? There's all sorts of things that we can start to venture into that help us get to a truly strategic position.

Susan Quinn: So, our worlds are very much the same. As I'm listening closely, do we invite the right people to the strategic session? Or is it just we default to management and then everyone comes, they're really looking at their to-do list and they, I get a feeling that most people, it's like, let's hurry up and get this over.

Sometimes you just need a brand refresh and that can take the year. And then there's just a whole lot of strategy of what you need on your brand. But let's just say there's a pretty big delta of where you are and where you're going. Give us an example of how perhaps if you can share, maybe it needs to be generic, but a good example that could give some context to the things that we're talking about.

Carla Johnson: So, I'm very big on tools and processes because I think unless we have a tool and or a process that that can be logistically and tactically executed, it's hard to make something that feels kind of squidgy, like exploratory and strategic questions. It can make it hard to feel that we can bring big woo-woo thinking and actually apply it to the work that we have to do.

So, if we look at the example of a question that would be strategic and exploratory, let's just say the question is, we understand that as a firm, this is the kind of firm we need to be in three to five years. This is the kind of firm we're at now. you know, it could be revenue, it could be market position, whatever it is. So, you have this delta, just like you said. What do we need to start to think about now to plan for the kind of firm we want to be in three years?

So, there's a couple of quick things that you can do that will start to shift the way the people in the room think. Number one, and this can almost be... it's definitely the easiest, but it can feel the most disruptive to the people who just like you said, they're in a habitual way of thinking when they come into the room to do these strategy sessions. Let's bring in a naive expert. And they're naive because maybe they're new to the company. One of our greatest weaknesses when we go into a strategy session is we have people with expertise. And when you have people with expertise, you assume you know the answer of how things are going to happen. And you also put blinders on what you believe is possible, and you stop taking in inspiration from other experiences, other brands.

So, when you bring in someone who is naive to the way that things are done around here, the way things are supposed to be done, when they start asking questions like, why do you think that's the way it should be done? And it starts to break a pattern of thinking that is often ingrained in a strategic session. We know what Susan's going to say. And I know how Carla's going to react. And I know what Joe's going to do. And so, we are already mentally jockeying before we even get to talking about the strategic exploratory things. So, when we bring in a naive expert, all of a

sudden they see things that are right in front of us, opportunities, hurdles, whatever, that we've been totally blind to because we're experts and we just mentally maneuver around them.

The second thing that I have people do is follow the innovation flywheel process that I developed and shared in my book, RE:Think Innovation. And so, with that, I literally send the participants who will be in the strategy session out on an assignment before we ever come into that room.

Susan Quinn: Mm-hmm.

Carla Johnson: And that assignment is, you know, sometimes they do the same assignment together, but they have to go to an environment that is completely different from their normal day. So go to a rock concert and just start noting everything you see. You know, what's the difference?

Like I live in Denver, and I went to a concert the other night at a place called Fiddler's Green, and it's an outdoor amphitheater, and about the first two thirds, people sit in chairs and face the stage. And then the top third, it's all lawn seats. And my husband and I were just sitting there just observing the difference in what people were like who bought the seats, like the actual chairs you sit in, versus the people who just sat on the lawn. And one is that the people on the lawn stood up a lot more. You know, it's kind of, I don't know, grass is pokey, or they didn't bring a blanket, or maybe they're just not people who like to sit. And you start to notice those little differences.

How does that artist engage with the audience? I mean, the person we went to see has been performing for 30 years. So how do you keep things fresh when you're delivering literally the same content for 30 years? And how do you keep it fresh and unique and different when the music tastes of your audience have changed dramatically, even if it's the same age audience? They've been influenced by other things.

These are all things to pay attention to. Maybe you go to a comedy show. Maybe you go to an art exhibit. Maybe you go to a circus. Maybe you go see the Savannah Banana baseball team play. Go to something that's outside your traditional experience, way of thinking, how you look at the world.

And then I have the team bring that into the strategic planning session. And we talk about all of the things that we observed. And I did this at a customer experience event I spoke at a couple of months ago where I taught them this process. Then they went out and experienced different customer experience opportunities. One was a dinner, one was a kayak ride, one was a, you know, hike. And they came back and they said, wow, I really looked at this experience completely differently. And there's things I liked, but there's so many things that I would do differently.

And so now we're in a room and the whole experience starts out differently. It's disrupted our pattern of thinking. And now we start to say, like, I saw this and I never paid attention to this before. And some of the patterns that I start to see are you know maybe how people are welcomed in. And then how does that experience relate to what you want to accomplish with your own firm? And now how does that start to inspire ideas? And I think always the other thing is get out of your traditional conference room. How do you be creative in the same physical environment where you have feedback from clients or you give employee evaluations? Get out of your office, get out of your normal environment, and it's interesting how quickly we start to get

out of our default way of thinking.

Susan Quinn: Well, it's I totally agree with you. To make the shift, you have to shift out of your normal environment. And I love that you give an assignment. And I believe, our team, that we are inspired by other industries that we may not be in. What can we learn from people and companies that may be doing it differently and may be doing it better. And how can you then take that, not replicate it, but make it authentic for what you're trying to achieve back to what you said at the very beginning.

And you can't have too many initiatives. I think everyone comes to that table with what they think it should be, but I think the framing of what we're trying to solve for however long that session is, but love this whole component of what can we learn from each other? And then it sets the stage for asking better questions.

Carla Johnson: I think what you just pointed out is really important, and I want to make sure it doesn't get lost, is that we're not looking to replicate what we saw. We're looking to relate the pattern of why we think that worked into our own situation.

Susan Quinn: Yeah.

Carla Johnson: And it's the patterns. Because as humans, we are pattern-seeking individuals.

Susan Quinn: Yeah.

Carla Johnson: So how do we disrupt our typical pattern of thinking? And I think one of the other things is when we default to ideas and we say, 'no, we can't do that because...' I say there's two things I want everybody in the room to use to give feedback when somebody shares an idea.

Number one is what I liked because that automatically makes us look for something positive in that idea and breaks us out of that pattern of, 'no, we can't do that because...', because we've done it before, because, you know, whatever that reason is for that day. What did I like about that idea? And sometimes it's, you know, I like... I like that it's completely different from anything that we've thought of. I like that you have the courage to share that idea. You know, it might still be an awful idea, but the way we get to great ideas is to start with more ideas. And, you know, it's like sales numbers. You will not get every single project that you send an RFP out to, but you need to send them out because that increases your chances for the interviews and the pitches and to get those, you know, signatures on the dotted line. The same is true with ideas.

And then the other piece of feedback or format for feedback is to say, this is what I wish. And the phrasing of this is so important because many times, especially in a group setting, we will hold back on the ideas that might be innovative because we proactively in our brain think we know what the criticism is going to be, and we don't want to have to deal with that. But if you say what I wish, it focuses on how to make that idea better or to expand it or combine it with another idea that's been shared. And that turns it into a 'yes because...'. So again, we're looking at how do we stop shutting things down or it turns it into a 'yes, and' rather than a 'no because'.

And that whole environment of how we share feedback and how we treat ideas that are shared can dramatically shift the culture in an entire firm. We have to look at what kind of environment

are we creating and nurturing for ideas to at least to be introduced.

Susan Quinn: That 'yes and' mindset, it does create cultures of curiosity and ultimately innovation. So, did I see in preparing for this that you have a goal and I need to go back to my notes here that you want to reach like 60 billion people to be innovative?

Carla Johnson: Oh, no [laughs].

Susan Quinn: No, 1 million innovative thinkers by 2025 [laughs].

Carla Johnson: Yeah. My goal is to teach one million people how to be innovative thinkers by the end of 2025. I'm roughly at about and I measure that based on audiences live events, workshops, things I can prove that people listen to me on a podcast like this one, you know, downloads, interactions, other things that I've done like that. And it's pretty amazing to be able to work with a team or be a guest on a podcast like yours and hear people come back and say, I listened to your podcast. I tried one, two, three things. And wow, this is what I'm seeing. This is what I'm seeing.

Susan Quinn: Yeah I think we're all trying to create communities. I mean, we love to stay curious, and we want others to grow and learn. And, you know, whether you're at any position in a company, and I really do want to reinforce that, that some of the best ideas really do come from an unexpected place.

Carla Johnson: Absolutely. And I think when you and I met, I told the story of an intern who helped solve the problem of a, it was a CPG company, simply because he said, well, what if we turn the product 90 degrees and market it as something completely different? And it's a technique that I call go down the rabbit hole, because many times in a meeting, we will hear somebody say, oh, okay, like, let's bring it back in. We're going down the rabbit hole. Like, let's come back. And what they're saying is, let's get back to the logistical and tactical thinking process versus let's see where this could go. And in his case, it saved an entire product. And that product employed thousands of people and brought back the revenue to that company. And it's just because he was, like you said, that naive expert.

And I give you a lot of credit, because as leaders, we see that somebody may ask that innocent question and, you know, what do you think about this? Why don't we try this? And a lot of times we shut people down and we say, 'no, that won't work because' instead of saying like, yes, run with that and see where it could go.

Susan Quinn: Well, I think everyone should have a voice. I see leadership as a mindset, not a title. And I see being innovative within your company also a mindset. And I think we both share similar goals that there are skills that can be learned. You know, when people say, well, I'm not very strategic, well, then learn to be if that will benefit your company.

Carla Johnson: Yeah.

Susan Quinn: So, I know we've had many things to talk about, but let me ask you, how do you, Carla, continue to better your best when you're already on that curious wheel?

Carla Johnson: You know, I am a huge habit tracker, Susan, because I believe there's so much that can make us curious and creative and better innovative thinkers that do come down to our

daily habits. And so, on my on my wall in my office, I have a big calendar. It's called the Big... A-S-S calendar from Jesse Itzler.

Susan Quinn: [Laughter]

Carla Johnson: Yeah, yeah. So, I put that on my wall, and I do what he talks about. Every two months, I have an adventure that I put on there. I have one big adventure. He calls it a misogi for the year. And so, I'm constantly looking at what are new things that I can do. And so that's a habit that I track. And so, for me, it's a habit of newness, a habit of new exposure.

Our family is very close. I pay a lot of attention to the music that my kids listen to. And I love it when they're saying, hey, mom, here's a new song I heard. I think you'd like it. You know, maybe I like it. Maybe I don't. But it introduced me to all sorts of new music that I never would have listened to before. You know, French rap. I didn't know there was a thing.

So I think it's for me, it's constantly making sure that I'm exposing myself personally to new stimulus, new experiences, new ways of thinking, because it's really easy to get into a habitual way of thinking for the sake of being productive. And I think in order to nurture our innovative thinker and our curiosity and our creativity, we have to be able to recognize and honor that that's an inefficient process.

Susan Quinn: I would love to get you back on another podcast and perhaps we will explore the latest tools that you're seeing, the newest things that you're seeing. We didn't even touch on AI, so that could be a whole different one.

Carla Johnson: [Laughs] That's a big one that I'm working on is how AI can help us expand our creativity and our curiosity.

Susan Quinn: That's a deal. I will have you back and thank you so much for sharing your expertise and continue staying curious and innovative.

Carla Johnson: Good.

Carla Johnson: Thank you, Susan. It was a delight to be here. I appreciate it.

Susan Quinn: Thank you.

Narrator: Thank you for being part of our best in class community. And until next time, keep bettering your best. Narrator: Thank you for being part of our best in class community. And until next time, keep bettering your best.

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