

# SMART GROWTH

How to Grow  
Your People to Grow  
Your Company

WHITNEY JOHNSON

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*To Clayton Christensen—for making this S Curve possible.*

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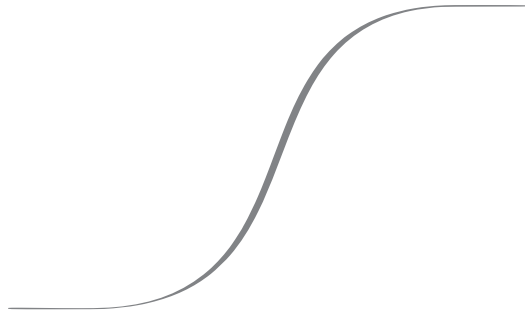
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# Introduction

[We] each live thousands of lives, for each day we become someone slightly different. [We] don't change in one giant leap, but across a million little steps. The most important step a person can take is always the next one.

—BRANDON SANDERSON

Growth is our default setting.

Astrid Tuminez was born into circumstances that looked like a dead end.<sup>1</sup> The sixth of seven children, her family moved when she was two from a remote farming village in the Philippines to the violent slums of the provincial capital, Iloilo City. Her father made \$50 per month. When Tuminez was five, her mother left, leaving her fifteen-year-old sister Marley in charge. They lived in a bamboo-floored hut on stilts over the sea. There was no running water, sanitation, or electricity. Marley washed their clothes by hand. They cooked their meals—primarily rice—on a dirt stove with wood. When I interviewed Tuminez for the *Disrupt Yourself* podcast she told me, “I remember having to cook rice at five to six years old, and I was afraid I would burn our hut down.” Rarely, they could buy a chicken; Marley would then butcher it herself and cook it over an open fire. She caramelized sweetened condensed milk to make a candy called *yema* that her siblings sold at school—a good source of occasional extra cash.

Nuns from the Catholic order Daughters of Charity invited Tuminez and her sisters to attend a special school for underprivileged children. Initially at the bottom of her class, far behind the other students academically, Tuminez was assigned the last seat, in the last row of the classroom. “That’s where the dumbest child sat,” she says. She worked ferociously to finish her first school year at the top of her class, “to sit right in front.” She says, “I learned to read. I learned to do numbers. I was exposed to this whole world of learning. . . . It was a fairytale.” In her school library, she pored over books about faraway, exotic destinations like New York. Tuminez dared to dream that she would live there one day.

Few, if any (including Tuminez herself), would have imagined that she would someday graduate from Harvard (MA in soviet studies) and MIT (PhD in political science), speak Russian impeccably, become an executive at Microsoft, and preside over an American university with more than forty thousand students—among other distinguished achievements.

I first met Tuminez when she was living and working in the city she had dared to dream about—New York. She had just finished a Kennedy School fellowship in Moscow, working with senior reformers who had helped tear down the Berlin Wall—people like Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikhail Gorbachev. Here was an individual who was indefatigable, unswerving in her determination.

I was in awe.

My wonder then was fleeting. But after a serendipitous encounter with Tuminez in the Boston Airport several years ago, I asked myself the question, “What animates Astrid Tuminez?”

Having since interviewed her in-depth, I now know she is driven to achieve her potential. There is a yearning, deep-bellied, to learn and grow.

Like Tuminez, you and I came into this world preprogrammed to progress. We have different circumstances and curiosities, but the same drive. To want to grow is human. But life has a way of muffling our innate desire to learn. As adults, we often find ourselves stagnant or bored at work and in our personal lives.

If you’re reading this book, you are motivated to change and make progress. But maybe you don’t know where to start or you believe you can’t

start. Perhaps you're curious and motivated to grow, but also too overextended with existing obligations to believe you can succeed at something new. Or maybe you have started but want to grow faster still.

Perhaps you want to help the people around you grow. You are a manager looking to decode talent development and succession planning, or a C-suite executive trying to expand your organization's top line. This book is for you too.

But because the fundamental unit of growth in any organization is the individual, our starting point for talking about growth is you.

Some of the questions we will answer are:

- Why, despite the desire to learn, can it be so difficult to start something new and stick with it?
- What does it take to gain and maintain momentum?
- Once we've made considerable progress, why do we sometimes tire of what we're doing and even feel we can no longer do it? Why do we outgrow things so quickly?

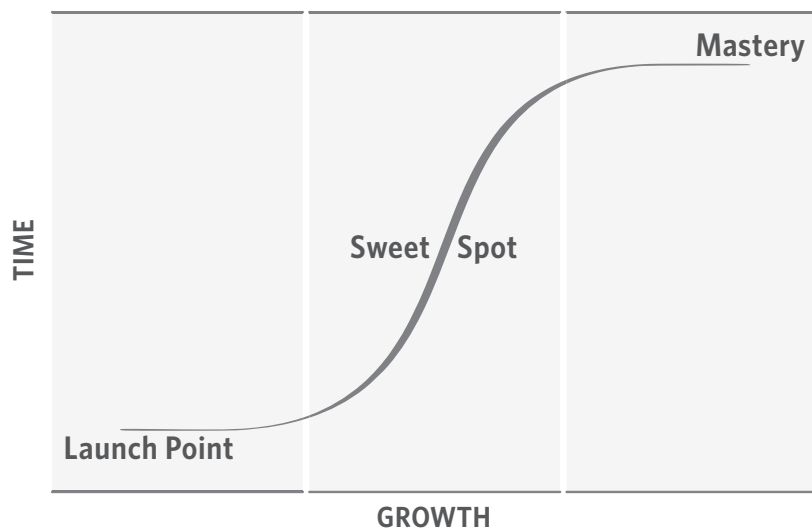
The more you understand about your deep longing to grow and how to grow yourself, the greater your capacity to grow your people, to grow your company. That's smart growth.

## **The S Curve of Learning: A Model for Smart Growth**

In the early aughts I met the gentle giant, six-foot-eight Harvard professor Clayton Christensen and was introduced to *disruptive innovation*. This theory—that a Goliath-like legacy business could be overtaken by a silly little David—changed my thinking as a Wall Street equity analyst. It also revolutionized my thinking about growth. By 2004, I had been an award-winning analyst for nearly eight years. I loved it, but I felt like there was something more. After an especially discouraging conversation with my manager, who wanted me to stay right where I was, I had a flash of insight. My current equity analyst self was the incumbent—Goliath. My future self was the upstart—David. To wake up the giant, I had to disrupt myself. It



## The S Curve of Learning



was revelatory: disruption isn't just about products, but about people. If we are willing to step back from who we are, we can slingshot into who we want to be—who people need us to be.

I codified a seven-point framework of Personal Disruption in a 2012 *Harvard Business Review* article and then again in my 2015 book, *Disrupt Yourself*.<sup>2</sup> The gist is this: companies don't disrupt, people do. When we commit to the practice of deliberate self-innovation (that is, Personal Disruption), we accelerate organizational growth. My 2018 title *Build an A Team* teaches how to leverage the power of Personal Disruption to build winning teams.<sup>3</sup>

I have now studied, written, advised, and coached about human potential for nearly twenty years. This book is the next step. Some people are intuitively proactive in directing their own growth, but even they can benefit when the process is made explicit. A map can jumpstart a smart growth journey. The S Curve of Learning is that map.

A little background on S Curves: in the 1950s, Iowan and social science researcher E. M. Rogers's PhD dissertation posed the question, "Why did

farmers [in his home community] delay for several years in adopting new ideas that could have profited them?”

He found that the rate of adoption of any new idea is S-shaped. The initial rollout is slow, represented by the base of the S. If adoption reaches 10 to 15 percent, what had been considered novel will now be considered worthy of imitation. This is the tipping point of the curve; beyond it, the diffusion of an idea can be impossible to halt. Adoption is rapid through this steep back-of-the-S sweet spot, until about 90 percent saturation is achieved. With little room left to influence change, the pace of adoption slows dramatically.

What Rogers regards as the seminal diffusion study still perfectly illustrates this phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> In 1928, a type of hybrid corn was introduced in Iowa that yielded an increased harvest of 20 percent, was drought resistant, and was better suited to mechanical harvesting. It took five years for the first 10 percent of farmers to adopt this innovation. But then adoption took off, shooting up to 40 percent in the next three years. Then, as there were fewer farmers remaining to adopt, adoption leveled off. Slowly, then quickly, this new seed “ushered in the agricultural innovations beginning in the 1930s that led to a revolution in farm productivity.”

The groundbreaking insight for Rogers was that this type of adoption wasn't bound by the type of innovation, “but that the diffusion of innovations was a kind of universal process for social change.”

Which brings me to another important insight: the S Curve can also help us penetrate the science of how we grow.<sup>5</sup> The same model that explains how human *groups* change is a meaningful analogue for how *individuals* change. There is still research to be done, but findings in biology, psychology, and neuroscience, along with our qualitative data, support my hypothesis: the S Curve of Learning is a microcosm of the diffusion curve.

The S Curve of Learning models personal growth. Every new skill learned, every challenge faced, takes the form of a distinct learning curve. We can pinpoint where we are in the growth process; we can decide what our next step needs to be. We can use this model to self-direct our growth; we can use it to help others grow.

When you finish reading this book you will have a clear mental map of how human growth is accomplished. This will increase your capacity to grow—yourself and others.

## The Six Stages of Growth

This book primarily follows the S Curve, from the Launch Point of an S Curve (chapters 1 and 2), through the sweet Spot (chapters 3 and 4), and into Mastery (chapters 5 and 6). We'll diagram the six stages of growth you encounter along the S Curve in the six chapters of these three sections. They are Explorer, Collector, Accelerator, Metamorph, Anchor, and Mountaineer. The S Curve framework will guide you as you move forward, deliberately and autonomously accelerating your growth. A seventh chapter, Ecosystem, examines the environment needed to expedite growth.

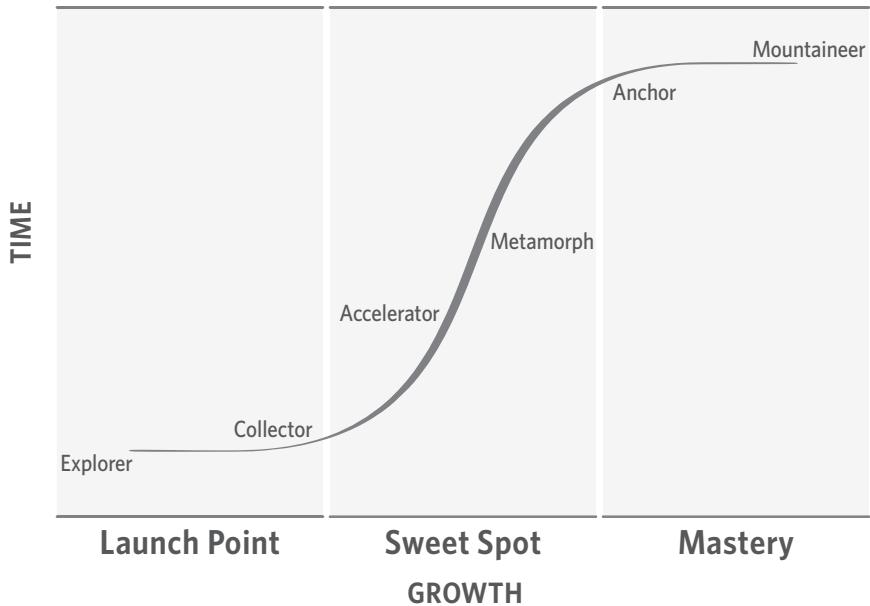
At the end of each major section, there will be detailed takeaways for organizational leaders. This is where we will be tactical, providing you with specific ways to apply this model, including how to use our S Curve Insight Platform.<sup>6</sup>

Each phase of the S Curve of Learning is marked by its own distinctive characteristics, frustrations, and thrills. When we start something new, we are at the launch point, grasping for knowledge. New behaviors are not yet our modus operandi (and like farmers in Iowa, we don't know if we want them to be). Because part of our brain (the prefrontal cortex) is processing the new and trying to understand how the new connects with the old, it has limited processing capacity. Our brain can easily get overloaded.

At the launch point, there are many new opportunities we can pursue. I call this the *Explorer* phase (chapter 1). We are a thrill-seeking species—and what can be more thrilling than standing at the precipice of becoming more of our own person? We may go headlong into this honeymoon of learning. Jubilant. We may also be awkward and unsure—anxious, impatient, apprehensive. With so much pending and uncertain, we can experience this phase as *slow*.

Once we decide an S Curve merits further evaluation, we become a *Collector* (chapter 2), seeking input, feedback, and data that will help us

# The Stages of Growth



assess the fit and value of a particular curve. It might still be a slog. It's *slow*, but it will also help us *grow*.

Once we reach the tipping point (assuming we reach it), we gain momentum up the rising slope of the S Curve. This is the sweet spot (part 2). What is new hasn't yet become a natural part of us, so deliberate practice is still the order of the day. But because we are gaining confidence that we can become who we set out to be, hope swells as our growth accelerates. We are an *Accelerator* (chapter 3). We experience *fast* growth.

As we focus on doing something new, we are forging a new identity. What we do becomes who we are. It's now natural and reflexive. We've conquered the change-averse instinct within us. Now we are a *Metamorph* (chapter 4). A lot of growth is achieved in a little time. Effort is still essential, but as our brain picks up the pace connecting the new with the old, growth accelerates and becomes difficult, if not impossible, to stop. It's exhilarating and feels *faster* than before.

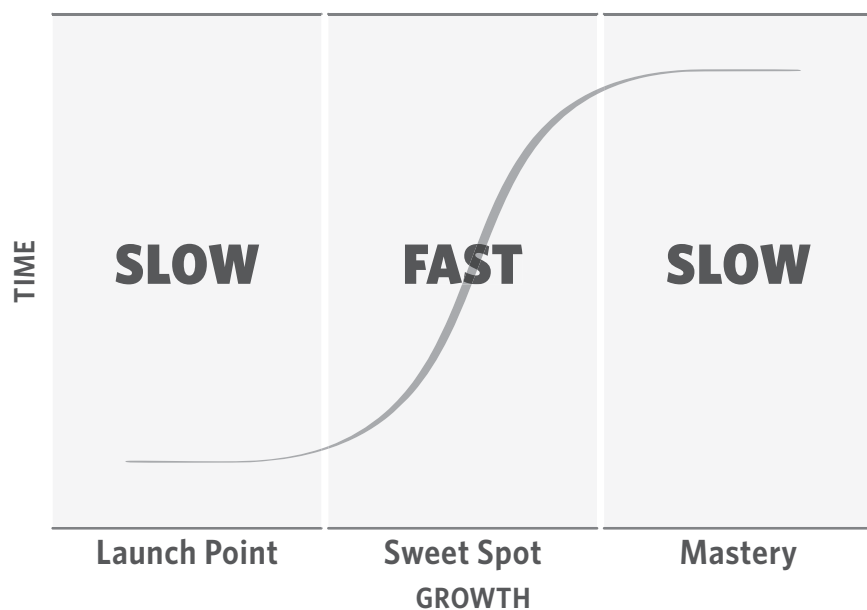
At the high end of the S Curve, ease displaces effort, and we are in the mastery phase (part 3). We have reached our objective and maximized

potential growth. Whatever we were learning to do, or to be, has now been accomplished. This newly learned behavior is anchored in us. It is effortless and automatic. What was once novel, unfamiliar, and difficult can be labeled pro forma: the new normal, the new *you*. We declare victory, we are in the *Anchor* phase (chapter 5).

The caveat: once the skill we've mastered has become effortless, we have excess mental and emotional processing power. The new neurons are now the old neurons. We no longer enjoy the feel-good effects of learning. Exhilaration can wane, and our brains can become bored. *Slow*. We all reach plateaus, and it's a praiseworthy accomplishment. It was hard work to scale the slope, hard enough that we may be reluctant to move on. But stagnation is a waste of life. In time, the familiar lethargy that goaded us to climb an S Curve returns. We need a new mountain to climb, a fresh S Curve of Learning. We become a *Mountaineer* (chapter 6).

Nobody climbs their S Curve alone. We need guidance and support from our environment. This is the growth *Ecosystem*: the web of interpersonal relationships that makes growth possible (chapter 7). We can have a map to

## How Growth Happens



guide our growth, and a backpack of tools, but if the weather is unfavorable, we may be thwarted in our journey. Ecosystems are not an afterthought.

The S Curve of Learning is a map to look at your life: where you were, where you are, and where you want to go—a continuous pathway to achieving potential. When you can picture yourself moving along this growth curve, you can more easily plan a trajectory and plot your progress. You can get smart about your growth.

## A Model of Smart Growth

Here's how it works in actual practice: Harry Kraemer is the former chief executive of the health-care giant Baxter International and now a professor of leadership at the Kellogg School of Management. In early 2021, after learning about our model, he talked to me about his own career as a series of S Curves.<sup>7</sup> “The first phase,” he told me, “was when I was in seventh or eighth grade, and taking my religious obligations very seriously.” The S Curves we choose are usually motivated by our values; the Kraemer family's values were centered on their Catholic faith. Young Harry thought he might become a priest like the uncle he looked up to, Father Francis. Knowing Harry well, Father Francis encouraged him to take time to explore: to catalog his abilities and look at different avenues for a values-driven life. Ministers, priests, and rabbis can have a big impact on their congregants, Francis said, but that was just one of many spiritual paths. It was important for Harry to look at what he did well, and discover how he could best serve as a force for good.

Kraemer took this to heart, took a pass on divinity school, and attended the Kellogg School of Management instead. Math was his best subject in school, so he studied accounting. Though Harry never became a priest, he cites this experience as his first important S Curve: making that pivotal decision about where his life would lead. This will happen with many of our S Curves: we start by exploring the curve itself. Some we will commit to, others we will not, but in all cases the decision-making process is a journey within our journey.

After graduating from Kellogg, Kraemer took an entry-level junior analyst position at Baxter International. Math led to accounting and that led

to finance and mergers and acquisitions (M&A). Harry decided, “I’m going to really focus on M&A. I’m going to be the best M&A guy.” He demonstrated early aptitude on projects handed to him by Baxter’s CFO and CEO. “I’ve got this wired,” he thought. “I’m locked in. I feel really good.” He told me, “I was starting to feel comfortable.”

But comfort wasn’t in the cards. Disruption was. The CFO said to him, “I think there are other things you could be doing. You seem like you could manage people and teams.” Kraemer didn’t jump at the chance. “That’s kind of out of my comfort zone,” he told his CFO. The CFO’s response: “Good leaders don’t want to get comfortable. I think you ought to get into a division and work your way up.”

Kraemer was starting out on another launch point of a new S Curve. He was no longer in corporate, but one face in one division in a sea of twenty-two divisions. What were his odds of standing out? Kraemer’s previous objective was to be the best M&A guy. Now he wanted to be the best divisional guy. Kraemer says he was fortunate, surrounded by great people, a supportive ecosystem that helped him gain competence. Running small divisions turned into running big divisions, upward progress on his new S Curve of leadership. “This is good,” he described thinking. “I’m getting happy again. I’m getting organized. I can start to kind of coast.”

In this book we’ll learn why starting to coast is a bad idea: comfort zones are the bane of growth. Kraemer was lucky to have Father Francis, and Baxter’s former CFO, and then the CEO, push him to disrupt himself. The CEO told him, “You have a financial background. I think you could be the next CFO.”

It had been twelve years since Kraemer had been in finance. He had a major knowledge gap: he didn’t know tax rules. Again, out of his comfort zone, on to the launch point of a new S Curve of Learning. He gained competence, accelerated into the sweet spot, and saw mastery within reach at the top of the “best CFO” S Curve.

Then he got a call from the board. They were considering Kraemer for a job he hadn’t sought—CEO. Kramer was initially cautious as he had been with each S Curve jump. Being a math guy, he takes calculated risks. The consistent factors in his calculations are: 1) can I learn and grow; 2) can I add value; 3) will it be fun? He wasn’t sure the reward of this change would

be worth the risk (a subject we'll address in the first chapter). But three voices urged him to accept the challenge. The board thought he could thrive in the role. His wife, Julie, thought he could too. Then Julie invoked the voice of Father Francis, reminding Kraemer of the seminal conversation from his childhood: catalog your gifts, explore many avenues, use your best gifts to influence for good. What a tremendous opportunity, Julie said to him, to be influencing fifty-five thousand people.

Meanwhile there were five people whose smart growth was more urgent to Kraemer than all fifty-five thousand Baxter employees: his children. Parenthood is a towering S Curve of Learning, and it ran parallel to Kraemer's career. All five kids needed one-on-one leadership. Could Kraemer help Baxter grow when his number one priority was at home?

Kraemer took the CEO job, but not without trepidation. That's how it feels to be at the launch point of a new S Curve. When he handed off the reins five years later, he'd been at Baxter twenty-three years. Passing through a season of struggle, Baxter had lost its stature and credibility in the financial markets. As a man who strives to live his values, Kraemer accepted responsibility for the failures and acknowledged that a fresh perspective was needed at the helm.<sup>8</sup> He bumped himself from the top of his S Curve. Still young, he wondered if it was time to find another company to run. He again thought, "I've got this wired. Even if it's not a \$13 billion company, I could start at \$5 billion. I've got the playbook."

He was out of Baxter less than a week when he was nudged in a new direction. Don Jacobs was dean emeritus at Kellogg and Kraemer's former finance professor. Jacobs said, "I want you to teach."

Kraemer responded, "You mean have a syllabus, grade papers? That's not happening. I run companies." Jacobs's response: "You've already done that. If God's given you more time, why would you run another company?"

Kraemer opted to teach. Jacobs assumed Kraemer would teach finance, his strong subject. But Harry wanted to focus on leadership instead: values and ethics. The boy who thought he might lead a spiritual flock has become the man who teaches values to a flock of future business leaders.

Harry Kraemer's career so far is a perfect example of smart growth when mapped to the S Curve model. Each curve has been related to the last but never identical. Each curve was a challenge, a disruption. And each



curve has shared a common denominator in its objective: be the best. The best M&A guy, best divisional guy, best CFO, best CEO, best teacher, best father and husband, best Christian he knew how to be. The mastery Kraemer seeks at the top of the overarching S Curve of his life is growth for himself and for others. Kraemer summarizes, “Leadership has nothing to do with titles and organizational charts. . . . It’s about developing people.” Smart growth will help you do that.

Harry Kraemer’s story, and other stories we’ll share, demonstrate that the S Curve of Learning is not a mere abstraction. It is a powerful tool that can maximize growth when applied in any life and any organization. Significant progress—whether in your career, in your team members, in your company, or in your personal life—can be visually represented by a rising S-shaped curve, like a wave one rides from novice to master, novelty to familiarity. We can apply this model deliberately. We can use it to develop a smart growth career, build a smart growth company, live a smart growth life.

## **Grow or Don’t Grow. You Choose**

Contrast the stories of Astrid Tuminez and Harry Kraemer with this letter to “Dear Abby,” America’s popular newspaper advice column:

Dear Abby, . . . Life has me worn out. I have accomplished more than I ever thought I could (considering my upbringing), traveled as much as I wanted, always strived to be a good husband and father, a good employer, a loyal volunteer, a supportive friend and good neighbor. I have done so many different things during my life that at this point, the thrill is gone.

At 56, I am tired of working, tired of travel, bored with my hobbies and sick of dealing with most people in general. I’m relaxed and laugh easily and have good relationships, but nothing excites me anymore. Honestly, if the Grim Reaper tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Pack your bags; tomorrow’s the day,” I’d just shrug and ask, “What time?”

... I went to a couple of therapists who told me I don't need therapy; I just need to find a new "spark." So what's a person to do? Must I keep wallowing through the days waiting for the end? Am I the only person who feels this way?<sup>9</sup>

The writer (I'll call him Mr. Blah) is by no means the only person who has experienced this kind of torpor. There are millions of Mr. Blahs throughout the world; he may sit beside—or even inside—you. He is quintessentially bored and stuck, disengaged from his work and his life, and like many others, he's been derailed from a path of learning and growth and can't figure out how to get started again.

If this letter crossed your desk as the cover letter for a job application, would you hire Mr. Blah? How would it play as a LinkedIn profile? It may seem obvious that you wouldn't be interested, but it's not as clear-cut as it first appears. Because Mr. Blah, in many ways, fits the mold of a competent employee who stays in their place, does the work they've always done, and rocks no boats. We often manage people to behave this way. To limit their contributions, exhibit no initiative, and not be moved by their work at all. Stay in your lane, Mr. Blah. Employee disengagement numbers are perpetually and depressingly high.

But people who want to grow and develop, who demand that we pay attention to their aspirations, are more challenging to lead. We want our candidates to be overqualified when they onboard and be willing to keep doing what they do forever. Instead, they want more training, additional opportunities, new roles. On second thought, if Mr. Blah made a tiny effort to camouflage his utter lack of interest in doing anything, we might imagine him an ideal employee and hire him on the spot.

But Mr. Blah won't grow your organization. Whether he joins the team with his present mindset, or it's programmed into him by lax management, he's not looking to grow anything. He's not going to positively impact the top line, the bottom line, or any lines in between.

One of the resounding pieces of feedback we receive while teaching these principles across the world is, "All leaders should have this training. This framework provides a common language for talking about talent development. My manager needs this. I need this."

If you want to grow as a leader and grow your business—if you want to drive smart growth—it's the Astrid Tuminezes and Harry Kraemers you want to hire. It is impossible to employ a growth-hungry person who wants to contribute to your organization, help them navigate through the entire growth cycle—to learn, leap, and repeat—and not gain an organizational advantage.

The greatest force on earth is human potential. Nothing is accomplished without it; anything is possible because of it. People are not just the most valuable resources of the organization; they are the organization.

When you as a leader are informed about every person's mindset and expectations around their growth, you can impact their growth. When you not only see them on their S Curve, but *help* them traverse the curve, that's smart growth.

This is the order of operations: grow yourself, grow your people, grow your company.