Female Disruptors: Julie Wagner of The Global Institute on Innovations Districts On The Three Things You Need To Shake Up Your Industry

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Be good to yourself. Everyone reading this magazine is someone that has worked excessively hard and pushed through the hard stuff to make some form of impact. We are all doing it and we have been doing it for years. Are we good to ourselves, though? This is

> the road that I am now on. It means taking vitamins every morning. It means stretching and going to yoga class when I really want to work on the computer. It means taking the time to make healthy meals with lots of green, purple, and yellow colors. It means drinking more water. It means putting down technology and listening to the birds sing.

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As a part of our series about women who are shaking things up in their industry, we had the pleasure of interviewing Julie Wagner.

Julie Wagner is the president and founder of The Global Institute on Innovation Districts, where she is currently leading a Global Network of nearly 50 innovation districts worldwide with the ambition to advance them — both individually and collectively — as leaders in this fast-evolving practice.

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Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit more. Can you tell us a bit about your "backstory"? Can you tell our readers what it is about the work you're doing that's disruptive?

I am the founder and president of The Global Institute on Innovation Districts (GIID). GIID is a global-reaching not-for-profit organization dedicated to advancing the growth and evolution of districts worldwide. Innovation districts are urban geographies of innovation that are anchored by R&D strong universities and medical institutions. Commonly the size of a neighborhood, these places seek to leverage their research strengths, unique combinations of talent, innovation infrastructure advanced technologies, "cool spaces" and social networks. Unlike science parks, which are commonly found in suburban or exurban areas, districts leverage physical density and physical proximity to create new, and really interesting advantages. Why are we so focused on innovation districts? Because they are designed to solve complex problems (e.g. infectious diseases and critical climate mitigation solutions), while at the very same time, design their work to also grow the local economy. I like to say that their ambition is to become a multiplier of growth — a locus for research commercialization and where residents are trained to become our talented workforce.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

Funniest mistake? I wrote and designed the organization's website in less than three weeks. Perhaps for many in tech, this timeline sounds sane. But I look back at that now and roll my eyes when I think about the incredible push that was required to create "the website" about a complex topic and an economy-shaping strategy. Why did I rush? Perhaps in that really early startup mode, there is a feeling like everything is on fire, everything is important. This feeling is also in the not-for-profit world! Incredible ambition, a pressure to deliver, and drive change. I think "next time", I will give that exercise a bit more time to be developed, and in fact, which is what we are doing now.

We all need a little help along the journey. Who have been some of your mentors? Can you share a story about how they made an impact?

Without calling out people in particular, I would say that my strongest mentors have been people that have been limited or discriminated in some way by society but have managed, nonetheless, to move into incredibly powerful and visible positions. The people that come to mind are tremendously different (size, color, religious beliefs, ethnicity, gender) but they all, interestingly, have common traits. To start, they don't take no for an answer even in a room of "no's". It's as if the word doesn't even affect them; they just keep going — pushing, advocating, driving, persisting with a drive and conviction that most do not have. They are also incredibly funny. The humor tends to be quite dry and often self-deprecating but their perspective on life helps make light of complicated, messy circumstances. A solid scan of my mentors tells me that people that have been hurt the most often used humor as a weapon to survive. Lastly, all my mentors are over-the-top brilliant although their brilliance is not textbook. They all have the ability to braid together their powerful intellect, their cunning ability to read people in a room, and almost instantaneously design a pathway that invites everyone to fall in love with them and their ideas. Collectively, one could imagine how they have made an impact — they have made a complete impact in how I view the world, what battles I take on, and just as important, when to let go!

In today's parlance, being disruptive is usually a positive adjective. But is disrupting always good? When do we say the converse, that a system or structure has 'withstood the test of time'? Can you articulate to our readers when disrupting an industry is positive, and when disrupting an industry is 'not so positive'? Can you share some examples of what you mean?

This is a great question. For 15 years, I have traversed the globe to meet with innovation district leaders and their constellation of R&D-rich institutions and companies. I am actively working with nearly 50 innovation districts where R&D-rich institutions and industry are pursuing new discoveries to solve very specific problems (e.g., unique types of cancer, climate mitigation solutions).

Building from my own experiences, I want to give an example of one of the memorable examples of industry disruption I have seen yet. In one of my trips, I was introduced to one research organization in northern Europe that has an insatiable appetite for driving translational research in advanced technologies. They are incredibly talented, for example, in designing and/or adapting a range of sensors, including sensors for large ships and containers that travel long and extremely dangerous waters. But rather than go through the process of writing an article in a scholarly journal and then presenting the article in a formal academic conference, they open sourced their technological innovation with the intention of learning if the market would respond. In less than six months, their technology was not only adopted, but it was also uniquely adapted by different users, and then applied by different boat operators. Their work and how they shared their work to save lives, in my book, is one of the most compelling examples of industry disruption. It had goals beyond "commercialization" and moved into "valorization," which adds value to society. There are people and organizations like this in cities around the world. We need to expose them and their stories because they are the last ones to be telling it.

I am going to contrast my global view on positive disruption with my personal view on disruption with negative consequences, what you are suggesting as something that is not so positive. Day after day after day, like most parents with teenagers, I am in a continuous battle over the use of phones and technology at home. I am starting to conclude that I have lost my family to Apple. As a mother and a human who loves interaction, that kind of technology — often coined as one form of disruptive innovation — is not what I would define as positive disruption.

Can you share 3 of the best words of advice you've gotten along your journey? Please give a story or example for each.

I would like to give three responses, all in three different moments in my life.

When I was young:

Don't rely on your looks. My father sat me down when I was eight years old to tell me that before I even get fixated on my face in mirror, to not take my looks for granted. How many fathers do this? Not many, I bet. It took me over a decade to understand how much more powerful I would be if I focused on developing my mind, character, and frankly, the values that I now bestow. I think young women, in particular, can fall victim to the ideal that their physical attractiveness is all they need. I am extremely focused on listening to how people talk to, and about, my daughter, who now happens to be eight years old. There are times when I realize I just have to correct their compliments. "She is so cute." I make sure to say back (and in front of my daughter)," actually, she is smart AND cute." That kind of imprinting matters.

When I was shaping my career early on:

Surround yourself with positive thinkers. People call me a highly positive and highly energetic individual. While I agree with this, my ability to create a global agenda and pull together highly influential people takes considerable energy and the undeniable belief that we can do more together. Surrounding myself with like-minded people has been crucial to keep the internal flame going. At a younger age when I was trying to shape my career, I carefully orchestrated who was around me — that inner circle — to both motivate and teach. I found myself pruning people from my life almost every six months and where, over time, I created a group that helped me see the value in myself. I don't need to prune every six months like before, but it is still something I practice.

Where I am now in my life:

Be good to yourself. Everyone reading this magazine is someone that has worked excessively hard and pushed through the hard stuff to make some form of impact. We are all doing it and we have been doing it for years. Are we good to ourselves, though? This is the road that I am now on. It means taking vitamins every morning. It means stretching and going to yoga class when I really want to work on the computer. It means taking the time to make healthy meals with lots of green, purple, and yellow colors. It means drinking more water. It means putting down technology and listening to the birds sing.

We are sure you aren't done. How are you going to shake things up next?

I have been incredibly careful to not use my gender or my race to push an agenda. I have worked for decades on extraordinarily complex societal problems where gender and race are undeniably a factor, but I have not pushed that agenda front and center. It is time to make this far more central in my work. I have earned the credibility and respect in my field to not be "put in a category" while I advocate for rightful change. Why does it matter that I say this or that I write this? As someone that is half black, I have learned that it's easy to be put in a box and dismissed. When that happens, words are meaningless. People don't hear you and you cannot drive change. I have been incredibly careful and very patient. I have helped create a network of strong willed, ambitious communities around the world that are focused on creating new engines of their regional economy. Getting there will demand that they develop and execute strategies that both educate and embolden women and people of color. This is the next chapter and I believe that the community of leaders around the world leading innovation districts are ready. This also means talking about these topics in the same room we talk about innovative growth, cluster formation, the new wave of technological advancement, and the redesign of our hollowed-out office market. It all has to come together, and we will be curating global summits that push these conversations forward. One in 2024 and another in 2025. We enjoy participating in other events. It's time to curate our own.

In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges faced by 'women disruptors' that aren't typically faced by their male counterparts?

I generally find more often than not that women disruptors are pioneers. They are more often "doing it alone" in the face of it all, while I find their male counterparts to be part of a bigger pack. Why is this? Is it because there are just more highly successful men? Are women wired differently in how we generally want to, or feel comfortable to, climb to the top? All I know is that I feel the difference. I think more women need to work together, to support our careers and to support our babies and how they grow up to be compassionate and strong individuals. Together, I feel we can find the way to be both strong and wonderfully soft. That is power.

Do you have a book/podcast/talk that's had a deep impact on your thinking? Can you share a story with us?

This is a really tough question. I also think it links to the question just above it. I have often felt very alone in my growth as a professional. I found books, podcasts, talks, and even television shows about strong women to be essential. I loved Mrs. Dalloway, for example, in my early twenties because it was just refreshing to hear how a woman's complex thought process can read on paper. I love listening to women podcasts about how they face challenges with their partners and children. It's just so illuminating how difficult our lives can be and how we break things down to try to make it all so much more 'swallowable', when the truth is, it can all just be too much, and we shouldn't be "breaking stuff down" or "making lists". I love strong women in movies and television shows, and I can't get enough of those either. I think strong, pioneering women really need to be around the energy that we are trying to create and it's just often hard to find. I use many sources to keep my flame burning.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.

The health of our planet is at a point of no return. The movement that needs to happen is the movement that is being talked about, but action is not happening fast enough. We need to get a grip on climate change in a way that only a small fraction of people (and a few countries) on this planet have embraced. How do we do it? I really can only see a few big options and perhaps they are all needed, creating an interlaced strategy that catches people where they are.

Idea 1. Nation states become incredibly regulatory (so heavy handed with policy and policing) to basically enforce crucial changes that need to happen. In this case, it could be, the removal of plastic from supply chains in certain sectors, for example. It could be the banishment of cars whose emissions are rate a C or lower. Yes, those amazingly fun and fast cars would have to go in this type of new world. Have a problem with it? Then Idea 2 needs to solve for this.

Idea 2. We need line up our most wealthy countries, companies, and individuals and have them finance a new web of technological solutions (e.g.., moving an F emission car to a B). Along with new incentives for changed behavior. We need some major carrots to go along with the sticks from Idea 1…

Idea 3. We need to divert large percentages of our military budgets to not just design and test, but also to *scale* decarbonization solutions.

Finally, we need to do more to expose the work and popularize it but not to a point it becomes “Disneyfied.” There are wonderfully, gifted people around the world (not just Hollywood!) that write playscripts that can shine a light on our next wave of heroes.

What other ideas do others have? We need to move…

Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

I actually don’t have one. I have had so many different people help me along this journey and they all have shared with me their own gem of how to embrace life. They all are powerful, and they have used words and quotes within a unique context to simply make a point. Here is one example: “A rolling stone grows no moss”. What this person was actually telling me in that context, is that staying busy is not only about staying vibrant, healthy, and active, but keep making change, keep making a difference no matter how hard it gets.

How can our readers follow you online?

Our website (www.GIID.org) is the best way to find our content — both deep in substance and light when covering events and how people come together as part of our Global Network. As I shared earlier in this article, we are updating our website now. The site now under development feels like it captures the true spirit of innovation districts and why we care so much about these small pockets of innovation and creativity that are emerging in cities around the world.

This was very inspiring. Thank you so much for joining us!

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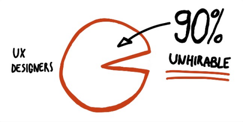

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