

Small But Mighty Agency Podcast

Episode 52: Growing the team to cross seven figures

Speakers: Audrey Joy Kwan, Rebecca Teaff

Audrey Joy Kwan

Experiencing a burst of growth in your business can test you and your team because it requires different thinking in leadership, culture and team structure. In this episode, Rebecca shares the milestones and gives us an inside peek at her leadership, culture and team structure as she leads her business to cross the seven figure mark.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Welcome to the Small But Mighty Agency podcast. If you're a creative, consultant, or agency owner, who wants to know what the roller coaster ride really looks like to grow your business from one to many, you're in the right place. My guest and I pull back the curtains on the realities of growing and running agencies of different sizes, and what it takes to build a team. And if you're anything like me, you want more than the highlight reel. You want to learn from the mistakes of others so that you can stop short of making the same mistakes. I'm your host, Audrey Joy Kwan, I spend my days as a coach and consultant to multiple six and seven figure agency owners. For the last seven years. I've been behind the scenes, helping people grow, lead and operate small but mighty agencies. Here at the Small But Mighty Agency podcast will uncover what works. And equally as important what didn't work to get these business owners to where they are today.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Hey, Rebecca, welcome to the Small But Mighty Agency podcast share a little about you and your agency.

Rebecca Teaff

Hi, Audrey. I'm really excited to be here and chat with you today. So my agency is Redstart creative. We are 13 years old this year, and we do branding and digital marketing from mission driven organizations. And that's a really broad term. So we'd like to get even more specific and really talk about organizations that are doing work within social impact and equity within their communities. So we are working with a lot of housing, mental health and health care, disabilities, education, climate justice. And what branding really means is how do you talk about yourself? And what do you look like in the world, and that's really the branding side of things. And then on the digital and design side of things, we do everything from

websites, digital marketing, ads, SEO, and then all of those beautiful things you get to see as well, such as logos, flyers, and your reports.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Take us back to the beginning, you didn't always have an agency. In fact, you started as a freelancer, give us your backstory, and what inspired you toward the agency route.

Rebecca Teaff

When I initially started, I was a graphic designer, loved doing logos they were like, so one of my favorite things, and I really loved multi page publications, I really liked how you could organize information. And I thought, Well, I'm gonna go out and I'm going to do freelance design work for these great organizations. And that was my plan. And probably within the first 12 to 18 months, I realized this may not be where we ended up, because I realized, while I loved the design work, I also really enjoyed meeting with clients and talking about where they were and talking about where they were stuck, with their problems could be and I'm an extrovert, so I probably shouldn't be in front of the computer all the time. And so for me as we, as I looked to change and to grow, the first thing I did was just bring in a virtual assistant. Right, I was like, I need some help with proposals and invoicing. But then we had an opportunity on a project that was a really big project that had to get done in a really short amount of time. And I was like, well, ordinarily, your production schedule for a book, this big would be two months. And I think we had three to four weeks. And I was like, well, I need some people to help me. And then I was able to pull in friends of mine that were designers that we've all worked together before. And it was really with that project. It was I really like working with the team. I really liked working with a team, but not only that, I really liked talking with friends and colleagues and going, you know, I remember how much you really like illustration. And we've got a ton of graphs and flowcharts that we need to make interesting in this. How does that sound to you? And hearing people get excited going, Yes, I would love to do your graphs and your flowcharts. And so that kind of was the impetus of the evolution that I wasn't sure if it was going to happen or not. And kind of was the starting point of us moving into those middle years of working with a team that was a group of contractors.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Looking back, what are a few key milestones to your team growth journey.

Rebecca Teaff

It's very interesting. Recognizing milestones in the rear view are so much easier than recognizing them when you're going through them. But I think some of the big ones were when I initially first brought in Gretchen, who was a person I had worked with years ago as a virtual assistant, realizing I needed help with kind of the back end stuff. Gretchen worked with me for 10 years and grew into my ops manager. Right. So that first decision led to somebody helping me grow the business over over a number of years.

And the next decision of bringing in team to work on that project and going, Hey, this allowed us to tackle something and realizing by adding in more team as contractors, we could increase our capacity. I would say a decision or a milestone for me was recognizing different things about myself that I liked to do, which is problem solve for the clients, lead the team, and realizing I love the creative work, but maybe I don't want to do the production work anymore. And so for people who aren't graphic designers, you know, the creative work is the concepts, what you think you want it to look like, where things should go. And the production work is when you're in those final edits, your spell checking or prepping for printer, stuff I've done for years. But I realized, I like this other stuff better. Every time I let go a little piece of something that didn't bring me as much joy as the other pieces, really, that that role of growing into not just a teammate, not just a work doer, but really growing into a leader of a team of people who are executing really great work.

Audrey Joy Kwan

When we think of going from a solopreneur into an agency business model, there are four primary things, we want to get off the plate to stop being the bottleneck in our business, service implementation, account management, project management and client strategy. While a VA can give you more time, you need to bring in people directly responsible for working with your clients. I'm curious of those four areas, service implementation, account management, project management and client strategy, what did you begin with, and what was your approach?

Rebecca Teaff

I remember looking up one day and go, This client, these these projects are kind of stalled out what's happening. And I was like, It's me, I'm the roadblock, right. And I was like, Okay, we have so many projects, now we need a project manager to have those interactions with the client to move the project on. And I'll say even now, I mean, that was probably that was a contractor we brought in, Laura, that was probably eight or nine years ago, right. And even today, I will say project management is really one of the most important parts of the business, as you're looking at it. But it really was a point of going, we're too big, I can no longer hold this or juggle this, this ball or this piece in the air, and then turning that over and realizing that was very, very critical. I really like the problem solving or the strategy part, I really, we talk so much about that in like the business development or the sales part, or whichever really what I what I hold now is business development or sales, whichever you want to call it. I call it problem solving. Right? Where are you and what are you trying to do? And let's talk it out and figure out what makes sense because it's so different for every organization. And once we do that part, then we assemble what will the scope of work look like? Who from the team will work on that project. So I hold on to that portion. And then when we're in a project, if something comes up saying this might not be in scope, or a roadblock or something like that, I come in again, to kind of do that, troubleshooting, problem solving, what is it that we need to do to move forward where we are right now. So those are kind of my main goals, and all the other things I don't do anymore. And it's wild, when I remember the decision to let go of the design process entirely. Because I was a graphic designer and a creative director. And I belaboured it, you know, I belaboured it for a little bit.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Service delivery can feel like a hard thing to let go of and for you that might have been design because you're a graphic designer, you're close to it, because you are so good at it and want things done a certain way. How did you develop trust and others to do the design work?

Rebecca Teaff

It kept coming up for me, right? When is the time right? Do I want to move into this full on CEO role, you know, and grow things? Or do I want to keep being a practitioner and what I love is I've seen a lot of different organizations. And I think when you're a business owner, you have that decision. And it doesn't have to mean if you want to be a practitioner, you can't be a business owner. If you want to be the practitioner, you need somebody to help you run the business, right? But if you want to run the business, then you need to get somebody into that role. And we had somebody you know, it's one of those, I reached out for recommendations in my network and somebody was like, You guys will get along so well. And she's so my creative director, and that's like six or seven years later. And what's really cool about it is when you are a person, that's the practitioner of the thing, right? Whatever it is you're making, and you get to see that person you bring on, respond and lead meetings and be like, they're in their zone of genius, right and that's so exciting. And that's something I love about being a leader or a manager, whatever you want to call it is when I get to see people doing what they love and just see them be so good at it, right? Like, it excites me. And one of the things we do is we, when we touch base as team members, and we use the word team, because in the beginning it was contractors, then it was like, like, three quarters contractors, a quarter internally. Now we're mostly employees. So we use the word team, but we try to, we always have an ongoing conversation, but we try to have intentional conversations once a quarter, or as they come up to be like, Do you really like what you're doing? Right? Because if you don't like what you're doing, you're gonna get bored, right? And that can be different if you've, you've been with me for six or seven years, what interested you at year two, might be very different at year five. And so I feel like as a leader, that conversation is really important to have people say to you, hey, this is what I'm really interested in. Or I'd like to learn more of this. And yeah, so I think, I think that's just an important part of as you lead through.

Audrey Joy Kwan

If you create a complex business that makes you feel trapped, you will never want to grow your business, you'll do little or big things to self sabotage growth, because nobody wants to scale overwhelm, not you, not me, I've been there, I learned this lesson as a second in command of an agency, I could not turn off my brain and relax because I would worry about what was and wasn't being done. It wasn't until I looked at the business for a productized service perspective, it give us more bandwidth, double the revenue and sell an exit the business. Since then, I've been behind the scenes of multiple six and seven figure service based businesses, helping consultants and marketers who are at capacity, get out of being stuck in service delivery and growing. It all starts by looking through the lens of a

productized service, download the free productize your service roadmap, go to Audreyjoykwan.com/roadmap or, click the link directly in your show notes.

Audrey Joy Kwan

In your journey, there was this transition from doer to manager to leader and I think you highlighted that really well. I think there's a decision point that every entrepreneur has to make. And that is, how big do you want to grow your business. And there is nothing wrong with keeping your business at a certain size, it's your business, you get to choose. But if you want to take your business into, let's say, seven figures, you've got to be okay with going through the journey of doer- manager - leader. And I find that oftentimes there is this resistance in managing others, right there, and most people will say, I wasn't born a manager, I'm not good at managing people. And my thought to that is no one's really born a manager. No one's really born with that skill set. So tell me about your journey from going from doer to manager before you hit becoming the leader of your business. What were some key things that you learned about yourself as you were going from door to manager,

Rebecca Teaff

I never had any training in management whatsoever. And I remember when I went to my first training and management after I'd been managing people for like two or three years. And I was like, okay, good. I got some of these things. Right. You know, I was unsure. And I was like, Okay, this is going pretty well. But I think you have to realize that your responsibilities as a manager is very different than your responsibilities as a doer. Right? It's very, very different. And when you're a manager, those things you're checking off as a manager, such as you know, is the project on time, has the project been billed? You know, it or all the right people on the project are very different than I'm going to sit down and design this beautiful logo today. Right? So there's definitely a mindset shift you have to make there. And there is also like you said, building that trust with team members and hiring. And, you know, I think as you look at our growth as an organization, you'll also see on the back end this evolution of how we hire, right? So our first group of contractors were literally people I just worked with, and I was like, Hey, Jamie, I have this huge project. I need your help on or Gretchen. Hey, Gretchen, you know, what are you doing now? I'd really I'd really love for you to come and work with me. And so that first group of people was people that I knew, and we'd all work together in some capacity. When we hired our first project manager, and we hired her, we realized that those of us that knew each other, we had to explain our shorthand, right. So that was a big shift in terms of Okay, now we're hiring people outside this bubble. So let's go ahead and make sure we're very clear on on what we're doing. And then really, the third evolution has been taking a very hard look on what unites us as a team, why do we all work really well together right now, and how are we going to hire for that? And so, so it's very interesting. It's almost like it's three different phases in terms of hiring, just the people, you know, that in the middle, it was kind of like, okay, maybe we need to expand a little and ask some other people. And now it's very much this, this is who we are. And this is how we go through.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Thank you for affirming that we're not all born managers and leaders, and that over time, you build a team to support the managing, so you can focus on the leading, there was so much goodness in what you shared, I want to go back to the concept of serving your team. True leadership is exactly that. It's serving your team, you go from helping clients to ensuring your team is taken care of, which grows your business. Over the last few years, can you share an example of a leadership action that impacted your people?

Rebecca Teaff

We were really poised the fall of 2018, we moved the majority of our team to employees, but not mostly full time, it was more, so halftime, and we were on a trajectory at the end of 2019, early 2020, to make some shifts and have a bigger core team that was full time. Obviously, we had some road bumps there and some changes. And so really, the last two years has been so much of trying to stay afloat, repositioning all of that as a leader, caring for team. But what I found really came out of 2020: why is everybody still here, right? So we're going through COVID, nobody knows what's happening. There's, you know, payroll protection, and you're seeing every day companies are shutting down, they're laying people off, and I and we look up. And what we were able to do was through a little bit of hourly reduction through the PPP, we're able to keep most of our team, we had one person that that went on to another venture. But we were able to do that in 2020. And I was like, well, there's another reason that people are staying here for this right when all this craziness is happening. And I think that's when we realized is what about all of us individually is drawing us to work together? And why? And that goes back to that values work that we did. And it was like, what do we value as an organization? Not what do we value individually? What do we value as an organization, you know, and really not just like, writing out the values like, Oh, these are our values, but like, what exactly are they, you know, like, what, what are the definitions for those values? And so, we were really able to identify those and some of the ones you know, that really come up, I think some of them are, you know, very much inherent to who I am right? Authenticity. Listen, I'm gonna show up as exactly who I am, I am goofy. I am unapologetically type A with a color coded calendar. And my team knows this about me, right? They just know that that's how I am and how I operate. And if there's something I feel strongly about, I'm gonna let you know, right? Like I things that I care about are really important to me. Our team over time had become so collaborative. And we haven't articulated that, right, we had an articulated, we're a highly collaborative team. And we support each other. And once we iterated that I was able to figure out why a phenomenal contractor we had worked with for years, was no longer working out and feeling bumpy, because we had developed into a highly collaborative culture. And this was the person that wanted to do the work and just bring it back. Right. So writing all of those out, gave us all clarity on this is why we're all here. But then as we've had changes, you know, with team over the last two years, we're able to have conversations about that when people came in, and we put in, in our our job posts we put in, we want you to show up as you, the authenticity thing, as much as you're comfortable, right, because that's a personal decision how much people want to show up. But we don't want people to feel like they have to have their work selves in their home selves. And so it just kind of snowballed after that.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Once you know your values, it becomes easier to determine who is the right fit. But I also think it's important to acknowledge that just because someone was a great fit for your business in one phase, doesn't mean that they are great for the next. What was that realization like for you?

Rebecca Teaff

To your point, just because people were great for one phase in the business, they might not be there for the next. I think we need to recognize as leaders, it's the same way for our employees. We may be a great fit for one phase of somebody's life. We may not be a great fit later on. And I think it's very important as leaders to not get personally offended by that because I see that a lot. And it's like We have done our best to cultivate conversations where the last two people who moved on to different roles, we spoke about it before it happened. So it wasn't a shock to me. It was, you know, I'm feeling this, or I want to learn a little bit more of this, like, I'm exploring things. I'm not sure where I want to go yet. And I said, Listen, we're so glad to have you part of the team. Just give me a little more of a heads up when you can. And I want to support you. And I also have said, if you want to talk through this potential other opportunity with me, let's do it. Right, I want, I'm not the one to like, hang on to somebody, I'll tell them, I don't think that's a good opportunity for you, or that sounds amazing. But I think it's really important to recognize that. And I think, when you have people leave in a positive manner like that, that's an amazing impact on your employees, right? They don't have this fear mentality of, oh, I can't ever think about wanting to do something else. Which again, all goes back, you know, to that culture and those culture fit questions when we are asking them, those team members that are coming on, feel like they've been around for a really long time. And I remember when I looked up our first hire with culture fit interview questions we interviewed in December of 2020. And she came on board in January. And I remember looking up, in February and going, Wow, this feels really good and really natural. And you know, since then, we've had a couple of shifts and some new hiring, we actually have two new employees who I think are right around two months. They're about seven, eight weeks. And what's been really fascinating, they both started on the same day. So I'm watching them interact with the team. But I'm also watching them interact with each other and support each other as they're learning about the business. And again, it's because we're identifying people that want to communicate and want to collaborate. And nobody prodded that collaboration. But all of a sudden, I have two new employee saying, Hey, do you want to touch base for 30 minutes, and I'll tell you about some of the stuff I learned or some of the things that I'm helping. And I'm like, That is a beautiful way to watch collaboration happen.

Audrey Joy Kwan

I can hear the excitement in your voice, and it has increased your business by leaps and bounds, including a 30% increase in revenue. Rebecca, before we wrap up here, tell me what keeps you motivated and inspired.

Rebecca Teaff

I love being outdoors. I think just being outdoors, fresh air, really is very grounding for me. And it's been very funny, because, like you mentioned, it's been an insane year, right not to mention, and I don't think I even realized like how big of a leap it was this year. I just wanted it so bad after the last two years, right. Because really 2020 and 2021 were caring for employees, caring for teammates, it was a lot of output of especially I'm highly empathetic. So I think it was a very challenging and draining couple of years for me. And just now, you know, the late summer, I thought I need, things are going to keep moving. And so I actually have started to walk I have made I think I'm at about 60 days a non negotiable walking 30 minutes a day. So this gives me some physical movement, which I will tell you is quieted my brain in a way I never thought it would. It's giving me fresh air that I really like even if it is cold and rainy, I'm doing it. And that's really made a big difference. The other thing that I really love is I love goal setting. And I love dreaming really big. My favorite resource for this is I've used kind of my fourth or fifth year of the power sheets by Cultivate What Matters. And what I like it is it's a goal planner. And so you think about different areas of your life, and what you think you want to grow or change. And you set goals for the end of the year. And then every every day, week, month, quarter, you go where am i right, what are the small steps? So I love saying I want x and then backtracking and go here are the pieces to get there. And I think for me, that's a really valuable tool. And it doesn't mean I hit every goal at the end of every year actually, honestly, I haven't I'm gonna go into it this coming week because it's been a little bit. But it's really great to say this is somewhere that I want to go and whenever I talk to people I'm like, you know, what do you want your business to look like? What do you want your life to look like? Write down a crazy goal and and go okay, well, what could you do to get there or start to make movement to get there and that I really find goal setting very inspiring and going back and going, Oh, look that that happened, you know, and maybe it didn't happen. It took me all the way till August of this year to make my physical health a priority. But I did it.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Rebecca, thank you so much for spending time with me and our friends listening today. Where can people find you?

Rebecca Teaff

Great so you can find all things Redstart Creative or web websites redstartcreative.com And then same tag on all the socials. And if you care to follow me for silly funny, you know walks in the rain, kind of thing my Instagram is Rebecca Teaff and I again I use that for fun and documenting my outside time.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Thank you so much for being here.

Rebecca Teaff

Thank you.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Hey there. Thanks for hanging out with me at the Small But Mighty Agency Podcast. If you enjoyed this episode, it would mean the world to me if you hit the follow or subscribe button in your podcast app and share it with a friend. I'll see you in the next one.