

Small But Mighty Agency Podcast

Episode 61: Overcoming the fears and self-doubt of growing an agency.

Speakers: Audrey Joy Kwan, Rebecca Bartlett

Audrey Joy Kwan

What are some of the most common fears and doubts that entrepreneurs face when trying to grow their business? In this episode, we'll be exploring the topic of cultivating courage as an entrepreneur. Starting and growing a business can be an exciting and rewarding journey, but it also requires a great deal of courage and resilience. Today, we'll be discussing some of the common fears and doubts that can hold you back from taking risks, trying new things, and ultimately achieving your goals. We'll also be sharing insights for overcoming these obstacles, including the importance of bringing awareness to generational conditioning and expectations from family, evolving your identity and understanding your self worth. Whether you're a seasoned business owner or just starting out, this episode is for you. So, let's dive in and explore how you can cultivate the courage you need to thrive in today's fast paced business environment. Stay tuned.

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 curtain 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 we'll 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 friends, welcome back to the Small But Mighty Agency Podcast. Today we're exploring the topic of cultivating courage as a business owner. My courage came from the sudden passing of my mom. She was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and passed away in three weeks. It made me reevaluate the life I was living and wanted for myself. Starting a business takes courage, you have to put yourself out there and my courage came from getting clear about what I didn't want my future to look like. That's why I felt

immediate soul connection to Rebecca, when we met and dug deep into it really stops us from taking risks. In today's episode, we get vulnerable, we discuss how generational conditioning and overcoming expectations from family can be a major hurdle for entrepreneurs, particularly those who come from families have prioritized stability, and security over risk taking. We also discuss evolving our identities as part of growing a successful business and understanding our self-worth as essential for building confidence and resilience, especially in the face of setbacks or criticism. So, let's get into it. Rebecca, tell us about you and your agency.

Rebecca Bartlett

So happy to be here with you today. I am Rebecca, the founder and creative director of Bartlett Brands. Bartlett Brands is a creative, innovation agency. It's a small but mighty, female led agency based out of San Francisco. Our clients are mostly well funded startups, mostly with female founders, doing interesting and innovative things in the wellness, food, beverage, consumer packaged goods spaces. We're experts in sustainability, so that's, you know, at the root, a lot of things that we work on and generally are working to change how society thinks of women and the products that we buy, given that we are women often making things for other women.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Tell us more about how you founded your business and your journey.

Rebecca Bartlett

This was such an interesting conversation. It's like I met you and about three minutes later, we were having a deep heart to heart like where I like dropped a tear, and you did too. So, you are instantly a soul sister, having the shared experience of having a very life changing traumatic event that really opened your eyes to where you are and what you need to do to do your next thing. You know, so for you, it was the experience of your mom passing from cancer. You know, for me, it was the experience of my brother, who was mentally ill suddenly dying. And all of a sudden you just have this clarity where you see your life. You know that next day it looks very different than it did the day before you are able to, you know, see and be empowered to make changes where before it's like you're just heads down, going straight forwards on your path to whatever it is, you're not looking around or something. And then all of a sudden, you come to this moment of like really deep awareness of yourself and your existence.

Audrey Joy Kwan

100% resonate with what you just said, my business was very much born from something sad in my life. My mom passing, made me reevaluate where I was headed in question if that direction was what I even wanted. At the time, I had a full-time job. And the type of work was really an iteration of what I do today in my business, but where and how I was doing that work didn't fit my shifting core values. And so, in my mom's passing, she gave me a gift or a silver lining, it was this clarity that I wasn't living my life on

purpose, not to say that it wasn't a good life, it just wasn't the path to what I think or believe is my greatness. And I felt that I just have more to give in reality, the silver lining is that it helped me see who I am and what I want. We're soul sisters in that way, because a tragedy brought you into that same understanding. You also had an aha moment that led you to start your business, can you share some of those?

Rebecca Bartlett

Yeah, and, you know, like you like I actually have always loved the career path that I chose, you know, formerly a fine artist, I went to art school, I studied design, I started working in corporate, and then I went to a boutique design firm in New York. And so, like I and then I was in corporate again. And, you know, with every step of the way, generally, I've not been someone that's, you know, not content, or happy with my career choice or that path, and have genuinely loved all the places that I've worked and my coworkers. So, this is like, really about seeing clarity, in a space where it's like, I wasn't necessarily unhappy. It wasn't like I was being tormented and didn't know where to go. It was just an eye-opening moment to see where you are. So, at the time, I was in a corporate job, I'd been there for about seven years. And after, after the incident, you know, I just I was like, Okay, I need a change, it was very clear to me that, that the change is being driven from a personal place, really, I need a change. And I don't know what to do next. And you know, step one, we were laughing about this when we met the first time, when you're asking me like, you know what, we're sort of like the practicalities that got in your way. I was like, I don't think that there were any practicalities, it was actually like, all these self-imposed, sort of barriers. And barrier one was just quitting, and not working for like three months, you know, because so much about our identities is tied up in what we do, right? Every time you meet somebody new, your first question is like, so what do you do? And so that, you know, like society has just taught us that, you know, you kind of are what you do. And your worth is measured by kind of your output, especially in like American culture, I would say. And then, you know, also for me, there's this like, generational conditioning of like keeping your head down and working, you know, bettering the next generation, that not resting, like being sort of relentless. And for people that know me, they would actually say that I'm like, annoyingly relentless, to the point of exhaustion. But like, that is something that's like been ingrained in me. So just taking this first step of like, stopping and not having a plan was like my first barrier.

Audrey Joy Kwan

I want to return to the words generational conditioning, my definition of generational conditioning is all the expectations my parents had me that were passed down from my grandparents, my parents were immigrants and constantly worried about having enough to care for us kids, they wanted me to pursue safe and secure opportunities. In their minds, there was this exact picture of what that looks like along with things you just don't do, like quit stable, secure job. My passion wasn't in the conversation of making decisions, it was always about working hard. For my parents, you could have fulfilled life without passion for work or workplace that didn't meet your core values. And so, when choosing my path, I never questioned if corporate was the right direction for me, my measurement of success was whether I was working hard enough and advancing. I count it as a blessing that I love the work I did but the motivation

back then was all wrong. And breaking free from that, breaking free of generational conditioning, for me, was all about bringing awareness to these learned behaviors that have been passed down to me. I didn't wake up to those things until this big tragedy happened.

Rebecca Bartlett

Yeah, yeah, that yeah, that resonates. My one of the most influential women in my life was my grandmother, who was an immigrant from Sicily came with her family, there's was like eleven of them, you know, escaping that life there and came through Ellis Island and you know, like the expectation was, you get educated, you get a job and you work and you're financially stable on your own, you know, like, there is no other world outside of that. So, you know, and also, just like I said, this, the idea of like working hard was very glorified. You know, no one in my family rests, if maybe my mom is listening to this right now, Mom, I have never seen you sit down, even like after you got your hip replaced. So you know, like, it just deeply ingrained in you from the beginning that like, like resting is like, it's lazy. It's giving up, it's, you know, so it's, it's so complex to then be like, I have no, I don't have a plan right now. When I really reflect on this time I, there was like this creep into of, like, fear of financial instability. I mean, I was already 10 years into my career by the time I took a break. So it wasn't like the early days, you know, I rationally knew that, you know, I could live on a budget, I spent my early 20s in New York City, I can, I can definitely live on a budget. So, you know, but you know, there are these moments of like, well, what if, after the end of this moment of self-exploration, like, what if you don't make any money, but that was probably still secondary, just to the idea of, of, of sitting back and, and not working? And just thinking for a second.

Audrey Joy Kwan

After your brother passed, you took a break. Did you quit your job to take that break? Or did you tell work you need a break? How did that lead to starting your business?

Rebecca Bartlett

Yeah, I quit the job and took a break for three months. And in that three months, you know, my goal was essentially, well, first of all, I, I'm married to a scientist that had a fellowship opportunity in Barcelona. So, what helped is that we actually spent the three months in a different country, in a different city. And, you know, as somebody that, like, doesn't actually sit still well, you know, I took Spanish classes, I learned photography, I traveled with friends. So, I was doing a lot of things, you know, but you just always had this inkling of like, I probably should be like, working that network right now. And like, making sure the next thing is going to be around the corner. And I was just, I kept like silencing it, because I'm like, no, you deserve to take three months, you know, and do these other things.

Audrey Joy Kwan

I hear you when self-worth is connected to being busy and doing more, a three month sabbatical will bring out all the Mean Girl gremlins in my mind. When life is always go, go go. it's hard to stop and lean into doing nothing. Trusting that insights and inspirations will come from giving ourselves more space is hard. It's like a freefall. You know that activity or the exercise where you have to lean back, let yourself fall, and trust that the person behind you is going to catch you? I feel like that's what it's like when your identity is tied to doing. But then you need to stop and take that extended break. Not knowing what comes after that break is really scary. You have to trust the freefall.

Rebecca Bartlett

Learning to freefall is so important. At this time of my life. Yeah, I was about 30, I had never free fallen before I would say now, 12 years later, I've taken many, many more free falls where, you know, I actually have built up the confidence that comes with being like, I know, that it will work out like I know that if I project positivity and due to my relentless nature, and a host of other things like I feel like that actually, there's just a huge change in a decade, a decade that where, you know, I did form an agency and it became very successful. And then I also weathered a lot of things where, you know, I had two kids, we had a pandemic. So, you know, I think the me of now, 12 years later, that is something that, you know, if maybe you walk away with nothing other than that, like the ability to learn to freefall and to trust yourself that like you always land on your feet, as I mean, that's a gift.

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 productized service perspective, to give us more bandwidth, double the revenue and sell it and 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

Free falling or in other words, stepping away for three months was the catalyst for starting your agency. What other challenges presented themselves?

Rebecca Bartlett

Yeah, the next sort of big barrier to just doing it was like, if I do it, you know, what if it fails, right, like the fear of failure, you know, the feeling of like, you own this, it's only me. And if it fails, there's no one else

to blame, like. So that obviously was something that like, felt very insurmountably scary. And, and also, you know, again, like society, like its, society is always there too...you know, we're, like, innately trained to mitigate failure at all costs. You know, that's why most people don't start businesses because most businesses fail. And like, we've been taught that failure is bad, you know, here in the Bay Area, failure is very glorified. So, you know, you can take that with a grain of salt. But yeah, there was that. And then like, kind of like, conversely, with that, too. I like had this fear of actually succeeding too, you know, just like being in the spotlight and having the pressure of it. I'm like, I'm an extroverted person, but not like a showy type person. I'm not somebody that like, aspires to be a celebrity or to be famous, or even have people like, look at them. Like, I like to fly under the radar. I like, you know, doing my work and I like my team. And like, if no one likes shines a spotlight on me like, honestly, I'm okay. And so yeah, that was like, the fear of the failure paired with the fear of success was kind of that next hurdle to climb.

Audrey Joy Kwan

I'm so glad you brought up these two sides of the same coin. Fear of failure is something we hear about more often than fear of success. Sometimes the fear of success, and the meaning we attribute to success can be just as big a mindset block as the fear of failure. Yeah. How do you deal with these two things?

Rebecca Bartlett

Honestly, this was the this was the one thing where I feel that my relationship with my brother and the his suicide, which not condoning suicide here, for anybody, that's not what I'm saying at all but, you know, he did not want to be trapped in mental illness. And he did not want to be shackled by drugs and medication that made him not feel like himself. Where I was like, he can be so brave and be so bold, to make a decision for himself. And like, all I'm talking about is whether or not I should form an LLC now and try to pick up clients like, you know, I'm like, if he if he can make a decision, a life-or-death decision for himself, like, why am I so scared? So that that was like, to me, he really taught me and gifted me, you know, this sort of fear fearlessness that like you can actually be fearless in the small decisions that we make, or medium sized decisions that we make.

Audrey Joy Kwan

When you experience the very sudden death of someone close to you. For you. That's your brother. And for me, that's my mom the reality that life is short hits home, it's different hearing someone tell you life is short, and then experiencing it through a very sudden loss with no time to say everything you have wanted. It made me stop and realize that God forbid, if I, if I could stop on a curb and be hit by a bus any day. And if that were the case, how would I want to have lived my life? Starting my own business just gives me life because there's so much freedom and building something that aligns with my core values. I don't want to put words in your mouth. What it feels like to me is that your business contributed to new life for you. What are your thoughts on that?

Rebecca Bartlett

That'll tell you a funny story. So, prior to going to Spain for this sabbatical, through my whole life, my the first 30 years of my life, everyone called me Becky, that was my name, I had a different name. And then we went to Spain. And I was like, well, Becky just does not fit with my like European persona here. I will become Rebecca, which is my actual name. And then when I came back from Spain, and I, you know, formed my LLC, which of course was like as uncreative as one could possibly be, just Rebecca Bartlett LLC. You know, I basically said to everyone that I knew at that time, I was like, I am coming back, and I am Rebecca now. Becky got left last year. Becky sometimes still comes out like after 6pm. Sometimes there's some drinks sometimes when like a client gets out of line Becky can step in, but yeah, no, I like I actually like fully changed my identity to be the person that I wanted to be, instead of just sort of being along for a ride that I wasn't controlling.

Audrey Joy Kwan

So much of our name is our identity. I haven't shared this before but when I started my business, I added in my middle name, Joy, because I want this business to represent and always be joyful. And like you, there wasn't much creativity in how I named my business, I use my initials to form AJK consulting, which operates as Audrey Joy Kwan, but an adding in the joy, I also felt an identity shift. Now, there's one more thing I want to mention that you've shared in conversation before the concept of self-worth, and how it's connected to growing your business. Can you share more?

Rebecca Bartlett

I used to channel like my inner man, that is actually how I thought of it. Because, you know, I feel like women are like, we're like, supposed to be humble, or at least act sort of humble and like, you just, again, like keep your head down and work and like, don't talk, talk too much about yourself, and, and then all of a sudden, it's like, if you can't do that, you're not going to win any of the jobs. And like, I literally used to embody this man mindset, where I was just like, the shit. It's just, it's totally an authentic, it's like a performance.

Audrey Joy Kwan

And what does it look like? Now,

Rebecca Bartlett

Honestly, I'm incredibly authentically myself now in a pitch. There is sort of only one version of me, you know, I'm not a particularly like clean cut and demure type person. And, you know, I really kind of lay out who I am. And what I expect from client partners, like from the beginning, like, I'm used to sort of, like, if you want to come on my branding journey, like I will spirit guide you through it. And we are together the whole way. But this isn't like, you hire me. And then you tell me what to do. Like, it's that's not the

journey that we go on. So, you know, and I've just found that again, but this is over 10 years later, with a portfolio of clients that there's proven success there that I can do this now. I think on like, day one, it's just not even possible. But it is, it's much more authentic. Like when I'm meeting with prospective clients, usually, it's the founder of the company. Usually it's like small and intimate, and we are like dating each other. Do we like each other? Can we work together do we immediately have that like creative flow, because that's the thing that makes the project successful.

Audrey Joy Kwan

You're 10 years into your business. And what you're doing today looks different than what you did, then 10 years ago, you thought you had to be someone else to win business. But now it's about finding a fit between you and the other party. And if there isn't a fit, you won't achieve something you're proud of, or clients will love. Okay, we've highlighted three key evolutions in your business journey. One is bringing awareness to generational conditioning and overcoming expectations from family. Two evolving your identity. And there is understanding your self-worth. Is there anything you want to add?

Rebecca Bartlett

Yeah, I guess I would just want to circle back to that, that last little nugget that we found somewhere in there around the freefall. Because like, it's so much more than business, it's really, it's really life. It's like you, you only have yourself in the end. And, you know, now, this version of me, I trust myself and I listen to myself. And I can be guided intuitively like I have a deeper relationship with myself than I can do that freefall moment. And know that like, like I will survive. You know.

Audrey Joy Kwan

When we're running a business, a good analogy is like driving a car, we can death grip the steering wheel and try to control everything and ensure that will get you to a destination, but it may not be the destination that you really want. Sometimes we need to let go enough to make space for inspiration and change to help us create a business aligned with what we really want. You can get so fixated on a number that you can death grip the steering wheel to get to the number only to realize that you hate the business you created. That's not what we're here for. We're here to create a business we love. And I've been in a place where I gripped on really tight only to end up in a space where I'm like, what am I doing? So, thank you for reiterating the power of free falling, and just not death gripping the steering wheel of the car that we're driving.

Rebecca Bartlett

Yeah, recently. I've been brainstorming with my team and other people that I you know, I talked to about business and life and stuff and just like well, what does the next 10 years bring? And that's a great, that's a great analogy of like gripping the steering wheel, where it's like, okay, I want to open up some paths where actually Bartlett brands could be a slightly different format. But instead of trying to like force it

down a road, you know, and like, like really gun it to go over the bumps to get there, like basically just starting to manifest a lot of different destinations in the future and just sort of like, let the car do a little self-driving, kind of towards what feels right. You know, just you have to just make sure that the road isn't blocked, you know, you remove the blocks, there's a lot of roads, turn down some, turn around, come back, you know, just to kind of start to see what the, the next thing is.

Audrey Joy Kwan

On that note, what keeps you motivated and inspired right now.

Rebecca Bartlett

It's always my clients, I would say, and my team, the people that I work with, I'm genuinely just a people person. And, you know, I feel passionately about the projects that we work on, like, I care about them beyond just like, does it look nice? Yeah, it's, you know, working with our clients to sort of bring their dreams to life and to make their companies successful. And then also, you know, the collaboration and mentorship of my own team, you know, my team is this awesome, badass lady group and they're amazing too.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Rebecca, thank you for being fully transparent and vulnerable today. It was an honor to have this heart-to-heart conversation about courage and growth. Where can people find you online?

Rebecca Bartlett

Oh, it's pretty easy, you can Google search me. That's easy. You can find me on LinkedIn [Bartlettbrands.com](https://www.linkedin.com/in/rebecca-bartlett/). At [Bartlettbrands](https://www.instagram.com/bartlettbrands/) on Instagram.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Thank you, Rebecca, for hanging out with us today.

Rebecca Bartlett

Thank you. This has been so fun.

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.