

Small But Mighty Agency Podcast

Episode 89: The “Big 3” Pillars Agency Owners Need to Build a High-Performing Agency

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What separates high-performing agencies from the rest?

It's more than just having a great product or service. High-performing agencies have healthy profit margins, retain great talent, have streamlined operations and enhanced brand reputations.

The secret lies in this asset: its your team.

From my own growth journey within the agency world, I've seen firsthand how growing your people and developing their leadership skills across all roles – not just your directors– leads to more profits and efficiencies.

In this episode, I'll share the big three pillars for high-performing agencies and how to use the pillars to identify and address team gaps in your business. Tune in.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Welcome to the Small But Mighty Agency Podcast. If you're a marketer or consultant, or a creative on a journey of growth from solopreneur to agency owner, follow along because I pull back the curtains on the realities of growing and running a scalable, service-based business and building lean team. I'm your host, Audrey Joy Kwan, I know what it takes to build an agency, whether it's from solo to three, five or twenty. I've done it, including supporting an agency owner to sell and exit. I've coached and consulted over 120 marketers, creatives, and consultants. And I've been behind the scenes of seven figure businesses. I also have a master's degree in communications specializing in organizational development. All this to say, I know what it takes to grow lead and operate a multiple six, and seven figure small but mighty agency. And here on this podcast is where we'll dive right in.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Hey Friends, welcome back to the podcast and part three of our series on growing yourself and the leaders in your agency so you can move your agency forward.

Forward can be defined as increasing your profits, retaining exceptional talent, streamlining operations for peak efficiency AND amplifying your agency's brand and reputation.

All of these things can't be done without focusing on the people in your business and how you lead or how they lead.

Leadership development isn't just for an agency that has directors. The more you grow the people in your agency with the leadership development they need to be leaders – regardless of their title – the more it helps your agency make more money, retain great people, be more efficient, and grow your brand.

So, if you haven't listened to the first two parts of this series, I highly recommend you go back and listen to the episodes. When I record these episodes for you, I intentionally cut the fluff. I believe in the quality of the minutes over the number of minutes. So, by going back to the first two parts, you'll gain more context and insight to apply in your agency.

From my own growth journey in the agency world, I grew from being an account coordinator to an agency leader and supporting an agency owner to sell an exit. I feel like I was raised in an agency and have longevity in this industry because I was given opportunities to lead early on. Someone saw in me what I didn't know back then and put me on a track to impact. She helped me see that leadership was a track, and I was hungry for it.

I know that all too often in an agency, it's the people who master the technical aspects of their roles that are given leadership responsibilities. But mastering a role and being a great leader is not mutually inclusive – just because you're good at one thing doesn't mean you are good at the other. In the agency world, helping doers become better leaders is how you grow the people who help you move your agency forward and help you get out of the day-to-day.

In every organization (agency or not), a leader must know how the business functions interconnect and how the team's work connects to the overarching business goals. And as a leader, you come to appreciate that business and the talent on your team are complex. Rather than wishing it would be easier, as a leader, you leverage your gifts,

skills and new perspectives to meet those challenges head-on. And over time, what feels hard feels easy.

The same applies to leaders in an agency, but there are unique challenges and opportunities in the agency space because the agency model is different.

To be effective at leading your agency or growing the leaders of your agency, we use a framework called Hey Achievers. If you go to the show notes, you'll find a link to our Hey Achievers Framework. The framework has three pillars to level up leadership in an agency.

Pillar #1 is structure

Leading an effective agency team requires knowing how to develop structure so that people can be creative in a way that meets the right goals.

Agencies rely on creative talent, including designers, writers, and strategists. Leading such a team requires developing a culture of creativity and innovation and managing diverse creative personalities.

Structure as a leader is defining your processes for support, empowerment and clarity. I'll say that again, processes for support, empowerment and clarity — and doing it in a way that aligns with your innate abilities.

Putting these processes into practice involves having an environment where creativity is encouraged and integrated into the work process.

It requires a nuanced understanding of each team member's strengths, weaknesses, and styles to tailor support and guidance effectively. Leaders create a sense of trust and safety, where taking creative risks is encouraged, and failure is seen as a stepping stone to innovation rather than a setback.

Implementing these processes means knowledge of project management tools and methodologies that facilitate efficient workflow and collaboration without stifling creativity.

Agency leaders use structure to navigate the delicate balance between giving creative professionals the freedom they need to innovate and ensuring that projects are on time, within budget, and to the client's satisfaction.

Ultimately, creativity and structure need to complement rather than conflict with each other; this enables your agency to produce outstanding work that resonates with the audience and achieves business objectives.

Pillar #2 is standards

You this all the time that leaders are visionaries. Vision is a gift, but vision doesn't move the needle forward. Execution does. Having a vision is merely the first step; the ability to turn that vision into reality separates true leaders from dreamers.

Execution involves (1) establishing values, (2) setting clear goals, (3) developing a plan, (4) mobilizing resources, and (5) guiding people to achieve outcomes. Execution is one word with multiple sides.

Championing execution (not doing execution) requires you to identify norms, establish quality or achievement standards and then align them to the individual motivation of team members.

Alignment ensures that everyone is working towards a common objective, with a shared understanding of their roles and the impact of their contributions.

Standards are as much about inspiring others with a vision as it is about grounding that vision in reality through effective execution.

Pillar #3 is Habits

In part two of this series on growing your business with leadership, I shared the 5 Key Things Doers Have To Unlearn to Succeed as Leaders and explained my contrasting approach.

In my experience working with people with strong doer backgrounds, there are five contrasting approaches that every doer transitioning to leader must unlearn and then learn.

Think of it like a sliding scale. As you unlearn, you move the slider closer to what you have to learn. Over time what you learn and apply become habits, and the scale stops sliding. The new habits support leaders to develop other leaders, not just manage people.

And the habits with the highest impact are communication, fostering collaboration and conflict resolution. While education, like online classes, supports learning, it doesn't

support habit change. Working with agency owners and leaders, we know these habits are created through workshops, feedback and coaching.

Agencies are fast-paced environments, and we have to balance the realities of doing the work now while developing you and your leaders to help you gain more freedom from the day-to-day.

So that begs the question. Where do you start?

Using my Hey Achievers framework, we can quickly identify your agency's priority by assessing the gap. The gaps are at the intersection of each pillar in the framework. Again, the link to the framework is in the show notes; when you see the Hey Achievers Framework, you will see that the intersections are where the pillars cross.

What you might define as a gap in your team, we identify as an opportunity for growth because, with our framework, we – and now you can see what pillar to activate.

For example:

If there is a gap in your standards and structures, the gap might present itself as accountability and that leads to an opportunity to develop your standards and structures to improve accountability.

Suppose there is a gap in your structure and habits. In that case, the gap might present itself as efficiency in your team, demonstrating an opportunity to develop your structure and habits to increase efficiency.

The third gap that might exist is the intersection of your habits and standards. The gap might show up as consistency and an opportunity for us to develop your habits and standards to increase consistency in your business.

We solve the “where do we start” question by assessing the gap using our Hey Achievers framework and then customizing a plan to support the gap so you can grow your agency, your leadership, and your team's leadership faster.

The framework I'm sharing is designed to guide you in unlocking the potential of you and your team and, by extension, your agency.

And the gaps identified within the intersections of structure, standards, and habits are not setbacks but opportunities for growth and improvement.

By strategically addressing these areas, you not only enhance your agency's performance but also contribute to a culture of leadership that empowers people to take initiative, innovate, and drive change.

As I conclude this episode, I encourage you to reflect on the insights shared and consider how they can be applied within your own agency.

Remember, I'm here to help you grow your leadership and move your agency forward. Book a consult with me to discuss how we can use our Hey Achievers Framework to grow your agency and get a custom roadmap.

I'll see you on the next one.

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 and I'll see you in the next one.