

Small But Mighty Agency Podcast

Episode 97: How to Empower Your Team and Let Go So You Don't Burnout? [Case study.]

Speakers: Audrey Joy Kwan

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Do you find yourself stepping back into the day-to-day of your business?

You're not alone.

What if I told you that you might be creating more work for yourself by inserting yourself back into projects and that there is a better way?

I get it. You're an agency owner who worries that standards won't be met, clients will be unhappy, and relationships will deteriorate without your direct involvement.

It's a common bottleneck and we'll explore how to effectively stop jumping back in and let go with confidence so you don't burn out.

You'll hear a compelling case study of an agency owner whose personal involvement became a major bottleneck and how I helped her break free.

And you'll discover how to rethink and redefine your role so you can:

- Delegate with confidence without risking the quality of delivery.
- Maintain and exceed the high standards your clients expect while the business grows.
- Empower your team and free yourself from the daily grind.

Stay tuned.

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. This month, I've been in a number of discovery calls where the same question came up multiple times with different people. Today, I want to share a case study to highlight how a client was able to move through the same challenge.

If you think, " My clients only want to work with me," you're not alone. It never gets old, and it's usually followed by the question, "How do I get them to work

By digging deeper, I usually find that there's something specific you can't let go of, or don't have the confidence to let go of because your fear the team will drop the ball. So you find yourself jumping back in to deliver or manage.

If that's you, it might mean you are hanging onto roles in your agency like Account management or Client Servicing because your clients praise you and even insist on dealing directly with you.

So why does this happen and will continue to happen unless we get concrete on identifying all the unique value you bring and passing it on to your team?

Well, as a niche agency, you've built your business around a highly specialized skill or knowledge. In the start-up phase, you—the agency owner—had the head knowledge and spent time becoming the expert.

While this works well in the start-up phase, and you might be able to manage in a growth phase, you can't reach the scale phase. Niche agency owners must transfer knowledge. For more info on transferring knowledge, click on the link in the show note for the episode on How to transfer niche knowledge to your team so you can scale.

But the challenge doesn't end with just transferring knowledge. As you grow, maintaining the high standard of service that initially attracted clients becomes a delicate balance of empowerment and oversight.

It's one of the very real growing pains of fully transitioning from "I" to "We."

In my consults with agency owners, I have found that although they may have some processes and standard operating procedures in place, they continue to be the bottleneck.

Removing yourself from personal expertise and client relationships isn't cookie-cutter. It does require figuring out what is missing that makes you feel like you can't let go and that the client isn't getting what they need.

Sometimes, it's one thing, but most of the time, it's things layered together, so we have to pull them apart to solve them. I like to think of it as a ball of yarn tangled up, and we go in to pull it apart so we can put it back together again in a scaleable way.

One of the most common expressions of frustration from agency owners is that the team isn't performing at its best, and they desire a team culture of excellence.

It's super easy to say, but what does it mean?

A core challenge is when you're so close to the work that you have a hard time defining excellence—in other words, the things you naturally do that have become part of your culture of working with clients. It seems like common sense to you but it isn't to others.

In other words, what is common sense to you is not common sense to everybody.

The first breakthrough in getting you unstuck from believing that nobody can do it like you is to help you clearly define what makes up excellence in your business.

We can create the solution when we have clarity about what the real problem is. Sometimes, the solution is not a process or system.

Here is a client case study I want to share with you to highlight what this looks like

Jessie is a client we work with, she has a small, full-time team of four people in her design agency (including herself). She finds it challenging getting her designers to own client presentations in a way that she feels builds trust with the clients.

The solution she thought would be effective made her the bottleneck in her business. It looked like this — she started to attend all concept presentations with the clients, thinking she would do it until the team could do it independently.

Instead, she found herself stepping in to save her team during the presentation when things felt they were going sideways and feeling even less confident. She did it with good intent, believing her team members could learn from her stepping in and then apply what they learned to their presentations. It didn't work.

She also captured best practices in processes and standard operating procedures, but something was missing.

The team could follow a document, but Jessie was still unable to let go because she felt the presentations were missing the excellence factor. She felt stuck and drained. Jessie was making herself the bottleneck and getting tangled up in solutions that created more work.

How did we untangle it?

We dug deeper into what “excellence” meant to Jessie. She had difficulty putting it into words because the doing part came so naturally to her. But we soon drilled it down to confidence.

And then, we looked at her team's strengths and recognized they were highly introverted.

Of course, we can't solve confidence with a handbook.

So, to help our agency owner get out of being the bottleneck, we set a KPI (key performance indicator) for the quarter to increase the confidence levels of her team by 50%.

The KPI would ultimately give the agency owner back more bandwidth and strategically lead to a more scaleable business because she gains back time in her business for business growth activities.

Once we have the KPI, we identified the strategy to support the KPI.

No, it wasn't talking-head teachings or training on being more confident in presentations; that would have been a surface-level approach nowhere near the core of the challenge.

We suggested holding a safe space for team members to practice real-life presentations. For three months, the designers would meet for 60 minutes each week, and in weekly rotation, each team member would present client work to the other.

Each team member used the safe platform, in this case, the meeting space, to practice presenting real-life work and then received open feedback and comments from other team members.

Jessie's role was to facilitate; she didn't have to prepare teachings or presentations. In fact, she was encouraged not to own the speaking in the sessions but to give space for her team to provide feedback.

The support the team actually needed versus what the business owner thought they needed was a lot less work.

It saved her time and gave her peace of mind. Before the three months were up, Jessie received feedback from clients that her team was providing concept presentations that were better than hers—music to her ears.

Let me recap by breaking down the steps. It looks like this:

1. Analyze the challenge to understand the real problem and then name the challenge. The more concise you are, the better your solution will be. In our client's example, the challenge is one word: confidence.
2. Clarify what solution gets to the root and is sticky. In other words, it creates lasting change. In our client's example, the lasting change comes from practice.
3. Identify the container that will support the solution. In our client's example, the container is a safe meeting where they can openly “mess up” without judgment.
4. Ensure that the container doesn't add unnecessary work to already busy plates. In our client example, we asked team members to present using actual presentations that had to be shared that same week.
5. Communicate the return on time investment. In our client example, team members owned showing up for their turn ready to present, and in return, they gained practice, confidence, and a safe place to make mistakes.
6. Provide the opportunity for people to own the solution. In our client example, we asked the owner to facilitate instead of lead. Facilitate means that she sets the agenda, but the team owns the talking. During feedback, it meant less feedback from the owner and instead encouraging the team to speak and provide input, even if it meant being okay with extended silence or calling on someone to share.

By consistently investing 60 minutes each week for three months, Jessie learned to let go strategically while providing the team with the real tools it needed to succeed.

It is true that there will never be another you, but it's false that someone else can't be excellent at the things you think you can't let go of. Sometimes, it's about making the right hire, and other times, it's about helping others get there.

Bottleneck situations come in different shapes and sizes, and yours will look different than this client's example, but from my experience, there is a solution. You might be too close to it to see it.

We can help. If you need support untangling yourself from being the bottleneck of your business let's connect.

Let's help you grow a business that doesn't have you stuck in the day-to-day. You know where to find me; click on the show notes.

Thanks for joining me, friends; I'll see you at 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.