

Andy:

Hello everybody. Welcome to the Reboot podcast, wisdom for work series. My name is Andy Chrissinger. I'm the director of coaching here at Reboot and also a coach and facilitator myself. And today I'm here with my colleague, Ray Foote. Ray, good to be with you.

Ray:

Hey Andy, great to be with you.

Andy:

Today we wanted to talk about a particular challenge that we see as being somewhat common for folks who are stepping into leadership roles for the first time or perhaps leveling up in their leadership, perhaps stepping into more responsibility or a role where they are leading leaders perhaps as opposed to leading a small team of say individual contributors. We have a name for this challenge. We call it the Brightest Bulb Challenge. And again, it has to do with adjusting to a new leadership role, sometimes directly from an individual contributor role, sometimes just from one level of leadership to another. And so let's start by defining the contours of this challenge. And then we'll talk about if you're experiencing this, if you relate to this challenge, what are some things you can do? to support your growth and movement through that challenge. So first, let's define this challenge. Ray, can you talk a little bit about what is the brightest bulb challenge and what are some ways we see it manifest in leaders that we work with?

Ray:

At its core, what we really mean by the brightest bulb challenge is it's a leader who's going from making or cultivating or creating a thing to turning towards making, cultivating, creating a team.

Andy:

Mm. Mm-hmm. Right, so it's, maybe another way to say that is it's moving from an individual contributor mindset where when we're in that mode of making a thing, it's a bit easier to see our contribution. We see the lines of code. We see the evidence of the copy that we've just written or the thing that we've built.

Ray:

Exactly.

Andy:

And therefore, you know, back to this idea of the brightest bulb, when we're an individual contributor and we're responsible for doing and making excellence in that framework means being the brightest bulb. It means being an expert in a domain, and it means producing really high quality or high quantity amounts of that thing.

Ray:

Exactly, and it's quite tangible, right? It's very tangible. When we are making something, it's very tangible what we've made.

Andy:

Whereas when we're moving into a leadership role, perhaps for the first time or maybe leveling up, as I was saying earlier, we become more abstracted from the doing of the work. And now our success as a leader is measured not by our individual contribution, but by the collective output of the group. So excellence in that framework means helping others shine, enabling the success, the collective success of others. And that's challenging for a lot of reasons that we're going to talk about, but at its core we're abstracted personally a bit more from the doing and the completing of the work.

Ray:

Precisely. And the metrics of that success are actually quite different.

Andy:

Right, right. And perhaps that's part of the core aspect of this challenge, right? It comes down to how we measure our own success and how do we, and also not just measurement on a kind of KPI objective level, but also a felt sense. It's also an emotional felt sense of, "Am I contributing? Do I feel like I'm doing good work?" And that can be a challenging move for folks to make, especially for craftspeople, people who have gone really deep on getting really good at a particular thing. It can be hard to not lean into that. So maybe here we could just pause for a second and talk about any maybe anecdotal stories. Think about clients that we've worked with. Anything come to mind for you, Ray, that might illustrate how this challenge could show up in the life of a of a leader.

Ray:

Yeah. As I think about many of the people that I work with, at their core, they started out their path, their journey of business and in life fundamentally as makers. I recognize them as makers. And there is this shift that happens from being... let's say someone who's making a film, to someone who's actually now figuring out how to lead on a set, and how to get the whole team to work together to make something happen. And being able to build those, that shift is a really interesting shift to notice.

Andy:

It requires a different set of skills.

Ray:

That's right. And a different set of appreciation and almost a satisfaction in seeing the team flourish. And a real sort of care to kind of see how people are moving on in their careers, but how the team integrates. I've often heard it described as the machine is really working. And the metaphor that can be pulled is a high-quality engine.

Andy:

Okay, so if you're a leader and you're listening to this, and some of this sounds familiar, perhaps

in your own experience, you can relate to stepping into a leadership role, perhaps for the first time, or stepping into a role with greater responsibility, and feeling that kind of inner sense of something feels off here. Perhaps I'm longing for the way things used to be. I'm longing for the simplicity of being able to track and measure my contribution and feel good about it. And now I feel like I've stepped into this maybe soup of leadership. And I'm not sure even whether I'm doing that good of a job. If you relate to that, and again, many of the folks that we've worked with as leaders report some manifestation of this. then the question becomes, what can I do?

How can I support myself through the growth journey through this challenge? And we have four self-reflective questions that we wanna walk you through. We'll have these in the show notes so that you can see them and go back and review them again. But each one of them helps kinda tease out an individual aspect of this challenge. And one or more of them may resonate with you more. So go wherever it feels like it's the most helpful.

But the first one is, how do I measure my own success? And what internal shifts might I need to make as a leader in how I measure my success?

To me, this goes back to the fundamental nature of the challenge that we were describing earlier. And it reminds me of an insight from, I think it's from Andy Grove's book, *High Output Management*, where he talks about the way we measure the success of any leader is by looking at the success of the team. That there really isn't a successful leader of a team that is not meeting its goals and thriving.

And so the internal shift that's at play here might be, you know, when I was an individual contributor, I could really think much more myopically about my contributions, but now that I'm a leader, I have to make this shift to recognizing I'm not successful unless the team is thriving. My role has become more facilitative, which means the inputs that lead to that success are going to be different inputs. They're going to be a lot more relational, interpersonal. They're going to be facilitative. It's going to be much more about helping somebody else get unblocked or unstuck.

And when I see my team thriving, when I see individuals on my team doing their best work, then can I make that internal shift to actually see the contribution, even if they can't see it? Can I see the contribution that I made to make, to set up the condition so that those individuals could be successful and do great making work? So I think that's what we're talking about here and that's what's here. But it's also kind of a bespoke challenge. You know, you as a leader have to kind of go in. inside and ask yourself, like, where am I getting stuck here? What might I need to let go of? So how do I measure my own success? What internal shifts might I need to make as a team lead?

Ray:

Well, I really like where you are going with that because I'm thinking also about the, can you move to a place where the feeling of being a maker can satisfy this feeling of making a team? that when you're making that the maker of the thing becomes a maker of teams.

Andy:

Hmm. Yep. Yep. Yeah. So it has to do with, you know, a shift in focus. A shift in kind of a shift in personal purpose, at least for that season of time that you're occupying that role. It doesn't mean you have to give up the making work. And we'll talk about that in a minute the balancing of, you know, kind of individual contribution versus leadership. We'll talk about that in just a second with one of the other questions.

So I think the second question actually is a nice follow-on to the first one and it is **how do I think about what constitutes time well spent in my job?** Do you see leaders struggle with this one Ray and if so, how does that show up here? How do I think about what constitutes time well spent in my job?

Ray:

Yes, I do. And I find that folks actually have to step into two very separate mindsets. Because in my experience with many of my clients, they're primarily holding both, in fact, both individual contributor and team lead at the same time. So there's a, there's actually a conscious in the beginning, there can be a conscious reorientation to placing or creating space and a container for the team lead work. When there's a natural center of gravity around focusing on the IC work because the IC work can be so satisfying. So there has to be almost a conscious shift to say, okay, well now I'm going to spend a day on team lead work, or I'm going to spend these hours on team lead work, or for one-on-one.

Andy:

Yep, yep.

Ray:

And so being able to kind of quantify how am I spending my time can often show up as doing even a time audit is a fantastic tool to use to just see and be able to be objective about it.

Andy:

Yep. That's such a great point. And I would add to the time audit, also perhaps an outcome audit, because one of the things I hear from leaders is, now I'm in this leadership role. I have a handful of direct reports. I'm spending all my time in meetings. I get to the end of a week, and I feel like what did I really do? What did I really accomplish?

Now, that could be because you're in too many meetings, and those meetings are not actually effectively used, the time's not well spent, so it's worth looking at that for sure. But it also could be that, like you said before, because the individual contribution work is so tangible, and you know, the kind of dopamine circuits are so primed to feel good about when we produce the thing, that we're not seeing that, hey, in those 10 hours of meetings I spent over the last two days, we actually solved you know, these three really critical problems and I helped these people get unblocked in the work that they were doing, which allowed them to produce x, y, z.

So if we can, if we can look at it in that way, as you're saying, kind of a time audit, maybe paired with an outcome audit, maybe at the end of the week, we can feel more of a sense of satisfaction at what was accomplished. Whereas if we're, if we're not thinking about it in that way, you can just sort of feel like I didn't do anything because I didn't produce anything. So that's an important question. **How do I think about what constitutes time well spent in my job?** And then you kind of alluded to this one earlier, this third question. **If I continue to have individual contributor responsibilities, which we know many of the people that we work with do, even as they occupy leadership roles, how do I support myself in context switching throughout a day or a week.** So this is a real practical question around managing energy and mind share.

Ray:

Yeah, that's also where with the aid of looking at an outcome audit or even a time audit, you can actually begin to have some objectivity on, oh, how am I actually spending my time? Another thought that I had or see in this. is that when your context switching... It can be very supportive to actually name for your team that, oh, well, now I've got my team lead hat on, or now I've got IC hat on. And so you can actually think of yourself in these two different roles. It can help to at least notice.

Andy:

Yeah, I love that kind of intentionally naming. Yep, naming kind of this is this is the mode I'm in, which is good for you. And it's also good for the people that you're interacting with it signals with some intention. Here's what I'm trying to do. Here's how I'm showing up.

This is also I think one of those things that's highly personal. Some folks might find that saving mornings for one kind of work and then shifting to a different kind of work in the afternoons works really well. Some folks might carve up their weeks differently. So say Monday is reserved for one-on-ones and Tuesday might be reserved for a different kind of work um, I think it's important to really have an honest self-assessment of "Is this working for me?" So it might be practical, say to stack all my one-on-ones on Mondays, but how am I doing by the sixth one-on-one? Am I still showing up in the way that I want to?

So, you know, we need to have some honest self-assessment there and also building in times for breaks appropriately, things like that. So this can get super practical, this question.

Ray:

I would, I'd like to add one other thought, which is you will find your way. And to claim your way of doing it can be also a way to, um, really come into your own, um, ownership of your leadership style. And I know I believe in, we believe that, that each that there is no magic book to tell you how to do this stuff. You will come up with your own way to realize this, to manifest this balance.

Andy:

Great point. That brings us to the fourth question, which I think moves us more into the realm of endings and acknowledging endings and honoring endings and letting go. And this is the question, **how might I be holding on to the individual contributor mindset in ways that are unnecessary and or unhelpful to my team?**

So here what comes up for me is, like you were saying earlier, the individual contributor work can be so satisfying and it can feel so safe. We know we're doing well when we're doing that work well. That the thought of letting go of that can be really scary for folks. And so we may be hanging on to the IC work because it feels really unsafe to not do that. Will I be good in this new role? Will I be contributing enough? Will people see me as valuable?

And again, so this brings us into a whole set of individual kind of bespoke challenges that are different based on the person. But I think, thinking about endings well here, thinking about letting go, even perhaps grieving the loss of an old way, all of that's... active with this question.

Ray:

And what's coming up for me with this question is the different timeframes that you're dealing with. It can take six months to build a team, whereas it might take six hours to create a really satisfying thing that you're making. And so having that arc and getting a sense of what that time arc is important to be aware of and that there may be a default that you can be heading towards, which it's super satisfying to spend six hours and make something. And yet that may not really be helping this six months from now, where will you be with this team?

Andy:

That is such a good point. I'm thinking about a longer time frame, longer-term investments for returns that may not manifest until later. But they're the wise ways to invest and spend your time now. Such a good point.

So again, these four questions we'll have in the show notes available for folks. You can go back and walk through these, journal through them. I'll say that this is the kind of transition that it can be super helpful to work through with a coach or a therapist. But there are some other things you can do if that's not available to you. Obviously, the journaling process of working through these questions individually is a great start. But you may also consider gathering some informal feedback from your team.

Ask your team, how am I doing with this transition? Is there anything you... would like more of, less of from me. How's it working for you? Again, those are data points. It's not that you will necessarily follow everything that you hear, but it's good to gather that feedback. Anything else that you can think of, Ray, by way of advice, if someone listens to this and says, yeah, this resonates, I'm going through this challenge, what can they do?

Ray:

Well, the thing that I would offer is that this is a really hard and challenging transition. And so to

actually think about it as learning how to make something new. So if you can think back to a time when you were learning whatever it is that your zone of genius is or your artistry is. And thinking back to the time when you were learning how to do that, um, my experiences is that a lot of those feelings will be the same. It may feel somewhat insurmountable in the beginning, but over time you will develop your way. And so actually engaging with that process and seeing it as a learning process and an opportunity to actually expand your ability to make more things at scale can be a way to support yourself.

Andy:

That is such a great framing, great words of advice, and I think we'll leave it there. And hopefully folks can dig into these questions, do some great journaling, and reach out for help when you need it. Thanks Ray, been great to be with you

Ray:

Thanks,

Andy:

today.

Ray:

Andy. Really great to be with you too. Good luck, everybody.