

Andy:

Hi everybody, welcome to the Reboot podcast. This is Andy Chrisinger here, the Director of Coaching at Reboot. I'm super excited today to have with me someone that I have known in the industry for, we were just reminiscing a while, six and a half years, Steph Yiu from Automattic. Steph, it's awesome to have you with me today. You wanna take a minute and introduce yourself?

Steph Yiu:

Hey, yeah, absolutely. Hi, my name is Steph Yiu. I'm the Chief Customer Officer at WordPress VIP, which is one of the business units within Automattic. And yeah, I've been working with Andy for almost seven years now. So I'm super excited to be here.

Andy:

One of the reasons why I'm excited to talk to you is that over the years, one of the things that stood out to me is that whatever you've done in terms of coaching, whether it's one-on-one or workshops, or we'll talk a little bit about that OG training group back in Atlanta of 2017 with some leaders from Automattic, it struck me that you have found ways to bring that work back to your teams so that it's actually impacting their day-to-day experiences. And that's what I'm most excited to hear from you about today. I really want to know, how have you done that? Because it's pretty amazing from my perspective to see that. But yeah. Yeah.

Steph Yiu:

Thank you. You know, so Automattic does this really cool thing where it embeds a coaching program within our organization. Not only do we work with Reboot regularly on all sorts of leadership coaching, coaching programs, things like that, but we also offer every person at Automattic, every employee, the opportunity to have, I believe it's 12 coaching sessions a year. So it's roughly once a month and it's slightly more if you're a team lead.

And I have talked to so many different executives over the years about the impact of the coaching program at Automattic on how it's leveled up the performance of my team. And they are always so surprised when I share with them just like what a tremendous impact it's had. And to me I'm thinking like, wow, every professional athlete, every like most, you know, top of their whatever industry, they all work with coaches. So it's so funny to me that within businesses and organizations, we don't consider coaching as like an absolutely essential tool because I think it is.

Andy:

Well, it's awesome to hear you say that. And I want to dive more into that and hear, like we were saying, a little bit more about how you have made the most out of those opportunities. And you're right, Shoutout to Automattic, it's pretty amazing the investment and commitment that this organization has made over the years. And it's beyond what I've seen in most cases. So that's... really amazing.

But should we reminisce a little bit about that time, six and a half, almost seven years ago in Atlanta, the pilot program? Yeah. So maybe just a little background for our listeners. This was the first, the beginning of work that Reboot did with Automattic 2017.

Actually, this started probably late 2016, just the conversations around, hey, you know, what would a leadership development program look like? At that point, I think Automattic was 450 employees, maybe at that time.

Steph Yiu:
Wow.

Andy:
And so we started conversations to design what could this be? What might it look like? And we decided we'd do a pilot. We'd bring everybody together. I think originally we were thinking, well, let's do this remotely, just, you know, cause that's how we do things here at Automattic. But we decided to treat a little bit more like a meetup and bring everybody together in Atlanta. You were part of that group along with, I think 11 other folks. And we spent three days workshopping the content that would eventually become this leadership development program. And I'm curious what your memories are of that experience.

I'll share some of mine too, but what stands out for you?

Steph Yiu:
I remember that it was the first time I'd had the opportunity to get together with other senior leaders across all of Automattic. Because Automattic is made up of a lot of different divisions, whether it's Tumblr or WordPress.com or VIP. And so it was the first time we'd brought in various leaders from different groups into one room to really just work on leadership development across Automattic. So I remember that feeling of like, wow, this is a really cool and dynamic group. And I also remember being very skeptical, Andy. Like, I was not really into the coaching thing yet. And I was like, what is this? What are we doing? I don't know what this is. And so yeah, I just, those are my two memories from the beginning anyway.

Andy:
Yeah, I think you were not the only one who was a bit skeptical of this group of outside facilitators coming in and teaching us about leadership or something like that. So, yeah, I remember that too. Although I don't remember you being, I don't remember that as much from you. My memories of you were like really engaged and wanting to learn, wanting to give feedback, and wanting to help us shape it into something that would be helpful for the rest of the Automatticians who would experience this over the years.

But actually, as a trainer, every now and then, there's a group that you might encounter a higher degree of skepticism, but you look for the one or two people that are on your side, that are getting a lot out of it, and then that can really keep you going. And you were one of those folks

for me at that, in that experience. So that's my recollection.

Steph Yiu:

Well, I think, I think especially if you're talking 2017, I was like pretty early on in my like more senior leadership career, I think at that point, I was probably leading probably the first big team I'd ever led, you know, probably 30 or 40 people at that point. So I was probably going through a ton of imposter syndrome to be completely honest around that time. And so I think if you got a sense of like, leaning in, it was probably because I was hungry for any tool available to me to help me help my team better. And prior to Reboot and all of this coaching, you know, investment, we didn't really have all that many tools for our leaders. Now, I feel like our leaders are really well supported. But, you know, in the early days of Automattic, you were just kind of thrown in to figure it out.

A lot of times in the super early days, it was like no feedback was good. Like no feedback was good feedback, and that you were performing. Obviously we've pivoted and changed a lot since then. And I really think, so you know, I remember of the three days that we got together. Day one was the rockiest.

Andy:

Yep. Me too.

Steph Yiu:

But what was really cool about having a rocky day one, we immediately put into practice the feedback cycle, right? The end of the day, y'all kind of asked what worked, what didn't work, like, what would you change? I think a lot of our feedback was around like remote work because I think we were probably one of the very few remote companies back then. And then day two came back and it was like, wow, all right, like, you know, put into practice feedback and you can really pivot and turn things around.

So then from there, I think we started to create some of the fundamental principles of what Reboot would be like as we deployed it across all of Automattic. How many people at Automattic do you think have gone through Reboot, Andy, at this point?

Andy:

Oh, well, it's in the hundreds. I mean, I would, I would imagine over 300, possibly 400 have gone through it. That'd be my that'd be my estimate. And I want to go back to the one thing you said, because it sparked a memory for me that because that was a huge learning for me in my career doing this work was that the pivot that Jim Marsden, my co-facilitator at the time, and I did after day one. I still remember the dinner. This is downtown Atlanta. We were having dinner at, just the two of us, at Ted's Montana Grill, wherever that is in downtown. I think the restaurant's still there with our laptops, just going, okay, we got some feedback. What are we gonna do? How do we pivot? We want this to be impactful.

Honestly, most of the pivoting was around packaging and presentation, and how do we, as best

as we possibly can, get on the wavelength of this group of folks? Because Automattic is a unique organization. And one of the things we were realizing is, and that uniqueness is important to their identity. And so it's incumbent upon us as the facilitators who are trying to bring something valuable into this culture to learn quickly how do we speak the language of this culture. So that was that was a huge lesson for me at that point in my career doing this work. So I just wanted to name that. I'd still look back with fondness on that dinner with Jim at Ted's Montana Grill as we rework day two content.

Steph Yiu:

I think one thing that I'm thinking about too, is that our culture has such a high degree of trust, that we all felt really comfortable sharing openly feedback because we all knew that it was going to help everything like help the program get better. And I think that's just something I love about Automattic culture is like, you believe in positive intent, and you're really comfortable sharing feedback because it just makes..It makes things like the pivot possible. It makes, you know, yeah.

Andy:

Absolutely. Yeah. So shout out to all the folks, I think most of whom are still at Automattic, who were a part of that initial pilot. Thank you. Yeah. I hope everyone, if you happen to be listening to this, that you can feel really good about that contribution, because it's made a huge difference.

Steph Yiu:

One of the things that was so cool about, you know, that gathering, um, you know, there was the coaching materials that provided a lot of tools to the leaders, which I think we've all carried forward. But the other piece, which I mentioned was like bringing together leaders from different groups within Automattic. And that has been a consistent presence and all of the reboot since, right? Like every time I have a team lead come back from a Reboot and I'm like, how did it go? One of the things that they said was having an open space to speak honestly and learn from other team leads and like across all of Automattic and feel like I'm not alone in the process or that I have other people to work through the process with. Um, it's something that I got out of the first reboot with Automattic and I feel like that's continued.

Andy:

Hmm. That's so awesome to hear. And that's a great transition into what I love to hear a little bit more from me, which we were kind of talking about at the beginning.

I see you as someone who, as you've had the opportunities to participate in these workshops and programs and trainings and coaching, as someone who has probably more than most found ways to integrate those learnings and bring them back to your teams in ways that are truly making a difference. Like it's actually changing behavior and practices. So I'd love to hear a little bit more from you...how have you done that? What has been your approach and what have you learned over the years in these experiences?

Steph Yiu:

I would say that, um, the coaching programs have really given me and my team a lot of different tools in our toolkit and it gives us avenues to problem solve. Um, and like, I'll dive into some specific examples because I think this, this helps. Um, and Andy, I was just telling you earlier, there are like,

I think four different ways that I think coaching has really impacted our organization and I can give examples for each. Um, so the first way that I think coaching has really impacted our organization is that every individual contributor has access to coaching. Right. So we're not an organization where you only get access to coaching if you're doing something bad. And we're also not only an organization where you only get access to coaching. If you're a team lead or you're an executive, right. It's available to everyone.

So, this immediately levels up your entire bench of like individual contributors and pretty much everybody in your organization. And it means that when an individual contributor walks into their one-on-one with their, their team lead, that they've already had the opportunity to work on career development, problem solve things that might be personally blocking them, help them see what's possible as opposed to what's not possible.

So they can go into that one-on-one with a manager and be able to say very clearly, here are the things that I need help on, and here are the things that I would love to achieve in my career in the next six to 12 months. And without the access to the coaching program, folks who are hungry for that type of interaction, that type of career development, that type of learning, they might have to lean on their team leads, but not every team lead is a professional coach. Not every team lead is really good at...helping people work through career development.

In fact, I would say as a former team lead who did have to coach folks early on without any coaching tools, I think that I was so focused on like, well, this was my career development path. So like everybody else has got to follow it, you know, because I didn't know better. But coaches know that there are many different ways to explore a career. And there are different tools that you can pull out in the conversation, different kinds of questions that you can ask to dig in.

Andy:

Mm-hmm.

Steph Yiu:

So at the baseline, I think it levels up all of our ICs and it just enhances the team performance because it accelerates the conversations, right? The one-on-one conversations, then the team lead can really focus on how are you performing. What's blocking you? How can we make sure that the team is gelling together? And it allows them to focus on those aspects.

The second area that I think coaching has been really impactful is the concept of toolkits.

So over the years, I've been exposed to all sorts of toolkits that reboot has given me or, um, or like other coaching programs. It just empowers team leads to have ways to either moderate conversations or problem-solve in a situation. So a good example is, um, so obviously, you know, I work with customers every single day and we work with enterprise customers.

So, almost always the problems that we run into are unique. One of the toolkits that we've learned from Reboot is this concept of inquiry council, where it's really about creating space to ask questions. Um, and there's no accusation. It's just about gathering information before you get to solutions. And that's a toolkit that not, I have not only deployed as a team lead, but it is now a part of our regular weekly routine.

We have a Monday risk call where we allow anyone on the team to surface a risk or a problem that they're having with a customer. And I really lean into, all right, before anyone solutions for the first five minutes of this call, questions only. And we use that to pull out information about what's going on with the customer, what's going on with their business, and what's going on with their technical setup to help us get to the solution later.

Andy:
Amazing.

Steph Yiu:
But what's most important about that is that nobody feels accused. Nobody walks into the call being like, Oh shoot, I really screwed this up with the customer. Like that's not the purpose. The purpose is we are here to problem solve. And I think it just empowers our team to get ahead of customer issues faster. Um, because we've deployed that toolkit. So that's just like one example of like how coaching tools can come into practice um, in a day-to-day interaction. Another example. Yeah, sure. Sure.

Andy:
Yep. That's amazing. Can I ask you a quick question about that one? I love that one. How have you, or what have you noticed about the way that the adoption of that tool has shifted kind of mindset and behavior among the team as you've, as you've kind of held them accountable to that practice at the beginning of those Monday risk calls, what have you noticed?

Steph Yiu:
Well, the great news is that so many people on my team have gone through reboot that the minute I said, we're gonna use inquiry council, everybody knew exactly what I was talking about, right? So it wasn't like, I didn't have to train the team because we were all already speaking the same language because the Reboot coaching is just like embedded in our, in like all of our leads and embedded in many of our ICs.

So that's one thing, but I think the minute I deployed that and said, hey, we're going to use inquiry counsel or we want, we're going to use an inquiry counsel approach. People like, you

know, sometimes you have like blinders on, you're like, I got a problem solved right away, but it just like opened it up a little bit and it kind of released the air in the room.

And also typically on these calls, it's an IC bringing up a problem and a bunch of team leads problem-solving. And so like, it can feel very accusatory if a bunch of team leads is firing questions at you but if you state that the space that we're creating together is inquiry council, and this is the purpose. And we're all marching toward the same journey, which is why we wanna retain this customer in the long run. It creates a safe space, I think.

And I will say like, I believe that personally, I've gotten better at moderating conversations and moderating tough conversations, both internally and externally, because I've seen...our Reboot coaches and other coaches in our program, deploy moderation skills. You know, when the temperature in a room is like really heated, sometimes it's okay to let it run and other times it's okay to like cool it off or, you know, all of that is based in this practice of being an observer and like really reading the room. And when you are a team lead, an exec, when you are running an onsite with a customer, when you're running an executive business review in a customer, and you're really trying to move the group toward a certain space, that's another tool I have in my toolkit from coaching is like, I feel like I'm a pretty good moderator and I'm pretty good at observing what's in the room, like not being blinders on like in my head, but like observing the space in the room and being able to move that space toward where it needs to go.

Andy:

Which, to me, I would imagine that comes through, it comes through practice. It's not just the toolkit alone. It's, okay, I've got a toolkit, I'm gonna start employing it and using it. And then, what happened? How did that go? What did I notice?

Steph Yiu:

I think now that we're talking and you're saying like, oh, Steph, like you've deployed a lot of these tools. I think probably one of the reasons why is because my job every day is working with humans, whether internally or externally, I am responsible for working with our customers on a day-to-day basis. So every single day I'm on calls either with my team problem-solving or with my customers' problem-solving. And that's why like any toolkits that allows me to help like steer a group to progress is really important.

Andy:

Yep. Tell me more.

Steph Yiu:

All right, so I have two more examples. So the other example of where coaching has been really important is when I've led reorgs within my organization. So I think so far in my career, I've led three major reorgs. One around 2017, Andy, when we first met. I think at the time we were like maybe 40 people. It's hard to remember at this point.

I led another reorg in like late 2020, early 2021, always lead a reorg during COVID Andy, it's the best time to lead a reorg. Um, but that was like when our team was like maybe 80 to 90 people. And I'm currently leading a reorganization right now and our team is like 130 ish people. And in, so, so I've done this three times. It's really healthy, I think for organizations to just like to break everything apart and bring it back together again when you keep growing in size and your business is shifting and changing. I would say that in 2020, when we led a big reorg within the organization, Andy, I brought you in to work with my leadership team.

Andy:

That's right.

Steph:

We built a change management like coaching program and that coaching program was really about. one, educating our leads on how to run change management because it is a skill with processes and playbooks and tools. And you gave us a bunch of tools that we sat with and explored together. And then beyond that, we had a unified language for how we wanted to approach this transition. And we really leaned into the William and Susan Bridges managing transitions book, which if you talk to any one of my team leads, they will like pull it off their desk because it's like they're holding up and like, it's on my desk.

But there's just language in that playbook that they use things like the neutral zone, which we reference or like a transition monitoring group or all of these things. And so it just got us all on the same page when we were leading the reorg in 2020. And now that we're doing another one and so many of the leads are the same leads from when we did it back during COVID, we're doing it again. But this time we're learning from all the mistakes we made the first time around. We're trying to do it better. Um, but it just allowed us to.

Andy:

What's an example of something you learned in that 2020 transition that you're now doing differently?

Steph Yiu:

So this time around, we have a transition leader who is not me. Um, so I am leading the overall strategy of the transition, but I have someone who is responsible for leading and guiding the full transition, especially when you're looking at 130 people and all the different moving parts. It's important to have a DRI who's working on it. So that's one thing. And then the other thing, um, is that we have a transition monitoring team this time around.

Steph Yiu:

So we, so for folks that aren't familiar with the William and Susan Bridges, like process, one of the things that they recommend is having folks within the organization that are not part of the, the leads that are leading the transition to just be a self-formed group. Like we don't actually

give them a ton of guardrails. We just like let them form and then it's their responsibility to funnel feedback back to the team.

And boy, that feedback's been harsh. It's been rough, but it's helped us do things like do more AMAs, publish more P2s, be more transparent, and things like that, and we're getting feedback from the team. So that's something that we didn't do the first time around because we just didn't have the bandwidth, but this time around we are doing it. And I think it's been valuable in just making sure that the leads are communicating in a way that is helpful to the team. Now, it is still not perfect. Still not perfect. Every transition is really hard.

Andy:

Yeah, amazing.

Steph Yiu:

As I look at this transition, I'm like, gosh, this is way better than the first time, but there are still problems this time around. But I think having all of my teammates go through that coaching program together and start from a unified place allows us to just like operate more quickly. We ran this transition very quickly. And if you know anything about running transitions and organizations, like you don't want them to drag out because the more it drags out, the more it at harms performance over time. So you do want a tight timeframe of running through it and getting it done, even if it's not perfect, you do want to. Like, close the chapter so that the team can go from like storming, you know, forming to norming, which is another term, like another tool that we got from reboot is the, the curve of team forming growth. Yeah.

Andy:

Right. The Tuckman model, yeah.

Steph Yiu:

Oh, yeah. The fourth thing that I was going to say in terms of how coaching has helped our organization is when we acquired a business, a couple of years ago. So we acquired a 40-person company and brought them into VIP and Andy, you talked about how, um, the Reboot program. Like really focuses on what is unique about Automattic, And I think all of our coaching has really centered around like, we want the coaching experience to reflect the Automattic creed and the Automattic beliefs. So when we ran through the acquisition process, um, and we were integrating their teams into ours, I actually, so I led the, the like acquisition transition team and one of the tools that I deployed, including all of the traditional stuff that you might think like bringing our HR team in for AMAs or doing onboarding sessions with our team and all of the normal things that you might consider is I asked the Automattic coaching program to come in and build a coaching program alongside our acquisition process. So we actually formed, I believe they ran for like six to eight weeks, but every week we would have the blended team leads.

So for example, if it was like...you know, a, you know, a sales leader on like the, you know, like

with an Automattic and then like the sales team from the team that was being brought in. It was like a blended team and we would just like have regular coaching sessions as we were going through that transition because we knew that it was going to be really challenging for everybody and we just wanted to create both a safe space for everyone to kind of work through any of those challenges. Make sure that the folks that were coming into Automattic felt really supported and felt like we were really investing in their success in the long run. And also bring a little bit of Automattic culture into the acquisition process because coaching is such a big part of what we do. So, you know, I worked with our chief of staff to put the program together and I feel like it was really successful. I think every acquisition is really challenging but I heard like really good feedback about how the coaching program was beneficial.

Andy:

It's so amazing. It's also striking me how much of the of the work that you've done implementing these coaching insights has been has been related to kind of not just one on one, like we say coaching. And I think a lot of times people think, oh, that's one on one. That's it's, you know, one person sitting, sitting down with one, one practitioner. But a lot of this has been group facilitated group work.

And there's been some, sounds like some power and efficacy in that and how you've utilized those sorts of approaches.

Steph Yiu:

Yeah, yeah. I think when I think about impact to the broader organization, I definitely think that group facilitation can be really powerful. I would say for me personally, one-on-one coaching has been absolutely transformative. I, A, do not think I would be Automattic today if I did not have coaching, truly. And B, I do not think that I would have been able to grow my career without one-on-one coaching.

Because for the first one, I think the early days at Automattic were so challenging, especially going through the transition from IC to lead was so hard for me. There were many times where I was like, I'm out, I can't do this, leading is too hard, it's imposter syndrome, it's too challenging, I can't do this. And having someone in my court who was like...Why can't you do this? What, you know, asking really tough questions and challenging me, like got me over that initial hump.

I always tell people that, like, I find the transition from like IC to team lead is like one of the biggest jumps that you have to make. Like, I think even more than like from team lead into like, you know, leading like a lead of leads or any of that, because like that first jump from IC to team lead, it's like, you're basically, it's a whole new job.

And...Um, I just felt so lost in the early days without having like somebody who was like coaching me through the tool kits and all that. And then the other piece is like, um, for me to like grow my career at Automattic, I think that having somebody who, so I've, I've worked with the same coach for almost, I don't know. Yeah. A long time, seven years, six years, it's been a long

time. And just having somebody who like, can consistently help me see where I need to grow and the paths that I need to, the skills that I need to form has really helped me accelerate my career development because otherwise I would have been sort of like feeling in the dark. And so that's been incredibly helpful.

Andy:

Yeah. What a gift to have that kind of continuity in your life, that kind of support along your leadership path. Speaking of leadership path, as we as we kind of bring this to a close, I'm curious if you were to think back to the staff that showed up in Atlanta with the rest of the Automatticians to be part of that pilot and think about that stage, where you were at that stage in your career. And if you had some pieces of advice for others who might be in similar stages, just kind of maybe getting started, or maybe they've been doing this for a while but haven't quite figured out how to make these kinds of coaching engagements really work for them. Any words of sage wisdom?

Steph Yiu:

So I always tell my team leads that coaching is available to them, but I'm never going to force anybody to coach because coaching, you get out of it as much as you put into it. So I would say like, you need to be prepared to invest in coaching. It's not like, it's not just a takes. You don't just like show up and the coach just like gives you a bunch of stuff and you and you're, you know, suddenly you're a better leader. It's really that true investment in that conversation, being open and vulnerable and willing to explore like what's working, what's not, challenging your own assumptions. Like those types of conversations is how you get a ton out of the like leadership benefit and acceleration and growth and all of that.

The other thing I would say is like, you really have to like, make sure you find the right coach for you, because there are many different coaches with many different coaching styles, and you should not be afraid to talk to different coaches to get a sense of different coaching styles. And then also, it's okay to take a break from your current coach to go work with a different coach for a different style and come back.

So I was a dancer growing up. I have danced my entire life from like middle school all the way through college. And like you want to work with different dance instructors and different choreographers because it rounds out your skillset and your approach and you learn different things. And so I kind of think of it as that, like I do have my home base coach. I call my coach like my home base coach. I go back to him regularly. Some years I meet with him more than other years, depending on what's going on. But I've also been able to meet with different coaches that have different skillsets or different approaches that have helped me round out my skill set. So I would say that would be my advice is you only get out of it what you invest. You really have to be comfortable with being really vulnerable and asking tough questions. And then the other is like, don't be afraid to try different coaches to find the coach that fits for you because it will help you like accelerate and you can, depending on what stage in your career you might find that different coaches are more helpful.

Andy:

That's great advice. Steph, thank you so much for hanging out today. This has been a lot of fun to talk and reminisce, and I'm inspired by you and impressed by all the good that you've been able to do, and thanks for taking the time to share it with me.

Steph Yiu:

Thank you for everything you've given all of us at Automattic. It's, you know, we wouldn't be where we are today, I think, without Reboot, so thank you.

Andy:

Well, thank you for that. Alright, see you soon!