
Mitch Simon: Welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere where CEOs, leaders, and experts at building teams,

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: companies,

Mitch Simon: organizations,

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: and amazing cultures share how to lead from anywhere in the world. I'm your co-host on the East Coast, Ginny Bianco-Mathis,

and I'm your co-host on the West Coast, Mitch Simon. And we invite you to join us to Team Anywhere.

Mitch Simon: Today on the podcast, we have Jordan Birnbaum, Chief Operating Officer of BEESY. Jordan is an Industrial and Organizational Psychologist and Behavioral Economist. We spend the bulk of the show talking about reflection and rumination, and then introduce reflection practices that you can use right now to create powerful engagement as you Team anywhere.

Hello and welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere. I'm your co-host Mitch Simon on the West Coast and on the East Coast is our amazing co-host, Dr. Virginia Bianco-Mathis. In the house today is our incredible guest, Jordan Birnbaum. And to tell you more about Jordan is Ginny. Take it away, Ginny.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Oh, thanks, Mitch. Jordan is Chief Operating Officer of BEESY in New York, which is an expert-backed agency blending behavioral science, my favorite, machine learning and consumer insights with marketing strategy, laser-focused on commercial outcomes. And you describe yourselves as scrappy, get-it-done team with the right mix of swagger and humility. I want to see that done.

Previously, Jordan was a VP and Chief Behavioral Economist for ADP, where he infused behavioral economics with new product design and developed the product, Compass, which some of you out there may have heard of, because I
certainly did. A leadership style product based on 48 assessment leadership skillsets.

Before that, Jordan was Owner and Operator of the Vanguard, a hybrid media production company. He received his Master's in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from NYU and an undergraduate from Cornell. Welcome, Jordan.

**Jordan Birnbaum:** Thank you so much! When you say it like that, I've been really busy.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yes. Haven't you? When you put it together, I know it always does that. And we want it to have Jordan here today because this fabulous article that some of you may have caught in the MIT Sloan Management Review around this concept of cognitive budget which we'll get into, and then relate it to what all this means for teams and this virtual world that we're living in. However, I first want to comment and some others will see this on your LinkedIn page. I love the little quotes you have, "Kindness is cooler than being cool."

**Jordan Birnbaum:** Yeah, I feel like sometimes kindness needs a little bit more of an edge to be cool. That's definitely what I was trying to do is just point out that, there's really nothing I've ever experienced that's any cooler than kindness. When people are kind, they are about as appealing as they can be.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** That's a very good point. I love it. So, let's get into a question we always ask in the beginning. What has the last two years been like for you as you've been on your own journey?

**Jordan Birnbaum:** Transformational. I think that there has been so much change. Much of it not intentional but reactional, and then having to reflect on—I understand that I ended up here but this is where I intended to be and to what extent am I going to be able to draw on the capacity to be proactive, to address anything I see that—Again, I can understand how I got here, but it doesn't necessarily mean that I intended to be here.

And, you know, I'm just making that up maybe a little bit less abstract. But even in terms of a practice that I now see a lot of people talking about, but taking the first 10 minutes of a meeting to just talk about personal stuff. Don't get into the business because we have gone virtual.

Most of us in the knowledge economy have gone virtual, we have to understand that there are certain elements that are necessary to foster the kind of
relationships, that are going to help us not only succeed in business, but to have a meaningful and positive experience with our careers. So, being intentional about things like that of opening your meetings without talking about business and making sure you make time for it would be an example of catching where you've ended up and then being intentional to make sure that you're making the most of it.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yes, very good. And no longer make the assumptions we used to when they were right down the hall. Right.

**Jordan Birnbaum:** And that we would be able to pick up on someone's energy to know whether or not they were okay.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** I love that. That is so true.

**Jordan Birnbaum:** That's why it's really important to ask.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yes. Make it blatant.

**Jordan Birnbaum:** It made sure that people don't necessarily know that you're interested. And again, when you're in the office and you can see that somebody is down and you can say, hey, you're doing all right? That's a really important thing. You're not going to be able to pick up on this now and to trust that people are going to bring their problems to you is a mistake. And it's really important for you to be as a leader, at least to be proactive in connecting and making sure that they have that check-in.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Right, and sharing your own. Hey, I'm not at the top of my game today, just warning you all, right?

**Jordan Birnbaum:** Yeah. That's one of the strongest things you can do. Psychological safety that creates is amazing. So, it's always just one model.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** I'm excited to get into this article which I keep sharing with everyone I can. And the entire title is "Building the Cognitive Budget for Your Most Effective Mind." How did you come up with this? Why did you write this?

**Jordan Birnbaum:** It all starts with one of our favorite NPR podcast, Hidden Brain. And there was a really powerful episode about rumination. And I was just fascinated because this had given a name to something that I knew that I
was experiencing, but I don't know that I was necessarily conscious that I was experiencing it.

And— that's the wonderful thing about learning is that when you can give a name to something, you have the capacity to then think intentionally about it. And so, once the idea or the concept of rumination had really resonated with me, I started to notice how often I was doing it in my own life and realizing how intensely problematic that was for me.

And then as I thought more about it, I realized that I think the opposite of rumination is reflection. Reflecting is what I think of as you know, thinking without an agenda. Just allowing yourself to come across whatever insights are available to you without having something that you're protecting or something that you're hoping to get accomplished.

And so, I realized that from my perspective, there's sort of two polar opposites of conscious thought were reflection and rumination. And so, with that in mind, I find a way to encourage myself to do more reflection and then simultaneously to abort rumination. And they were two very different activities because to seek out reflection, it was something that I had to do proactively. And to stop myself from ruminating, it was something I had to do reactively. And so, there were these kind of two different skill sets I was trying to develop. And as I was going through this for myself —and then my penchant for writing things down, the idea of a cognitive budget emerged, and it was just about making a plan for where you want to spend your mental energy.

You only have so much mental energy over the course of a day, where do you want to spend it? And that's how budget got merged with cognitive. And now I'm on your podcast—

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Fabulous, right? And now we can see the connection then with leaders and teams. They can ruminate and take themselves down that negative spiral unless they have a cognitive budget that they follow, which we will get to—

**Jordan Birnbaum:** Oh, absolutely—

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** In a minute—

**Jordan Birnbaum:** But I would say that individually, collectively, collaboratively, more reflection and less rumination is a huge win for everyone. So whatever we can do to encourage that we want to do.
Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Right.

Mitch Simon: Jordan, can you give us the distinction for our listeners between reflection and rumination?

Jordan Birnbaum: Sure. Thank you. I should have established that earlier. Rumination is getting into a negative cycle of thought that doesn't lead you anywhere. The definition that I use in the article comes from a psychologist, Amy Somerville, who likens it to the digestive system of cows, where they chew their food, digest it, and then regurgitate it and continue chewing it even though they got no nutritional value from it. It's not the most pleasant visual but maybe that's appropriate given what it represents in us.

So, ruminating is thinking about something that impacts you negatively and not getting anywhere, not getting to a point of resolution, not getting to a point of closure, not getting any new insights. Basically, it's thinking without any nourishment. And the problem with rumination is that it's a cycle and it has no off route. And you will get stuck there and spend so much of your energy in a place that doesn't serve you and doesn't even reflect reality.

What you'll find about rumination is that it's usually based on very exaggerated beliefs. And so, in many ways, it's just a means of torturing yourself. And so anything that we can do to stop rumination is a really positive thing for our experience of life.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And so, then reflection means what?

Jordan Birnbaum: Reflection is thinking it without an agenda. It's allowing yourself to make connections. It's allowing yourself to be open to your creative minds, to not shrug off any ideas because you think they are silly. I think it's getting to a place of genuine curiosity.

I think that when we are at our best as human beings, we are insatiably curious. But curiosity requires an absence of fear. And so, I think for us to be able to reflect, we have to get to a place where we're comfortable with whatever is going to come across our minds and allow ourselves to go there. That requires a lot of work too. It's not easy to have a sense of freedom to allow your mind to go anywhere without trying to control it, but it is a very worthwhile thing to do. We all do reflect. It's just a question of how often and to what extent, but it is something that happens naturally for us. We all can think about times that we've just been reflecting and come across really good ideas.
So, you know what it feels like and then the question becomes, well, how can you do more of it?

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Right, the proverbial in the shower.

**Ginny and Jordan:** Right—

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** And that commercial, when all the businessmen go into the shower because that's where they figure out that [inaudible]. All right. So then the definition of a cognitive budget, and then we'll get into some examples. So cognitive budget does what?

**Jordan Birnbaum:** Cognitive budget does two things. It helps you identify the things you want to reflect on, and it helps you identify the ruminations that you want to abort.

And so let's start with the ruminations. If you can identify what you tend to ruminate about and you write them down like I was saying earlier, when you give a name to something, it becomes a lot more manageable. The next time you ruminate about them, you're going to have a different level of awareness of what's happening than you've ever had before. And with that awareness will come the capacity to stop yourself.

And it's not easy. It takes some work. You'll find that sometimes, you really don't want to stop ruminating because you're quite addicted to it. But the more that you can think about how it is not serving you, how you are eating through your precious mental energy, you'll start to find actually almost a natural motivation to stop yourself and to just say, okay, let me go someplace else, because this is not a productive use of my mental energy.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** A whole team can do that?

**Jordan Birnbaum:** Yes, both individually and collectively. It happens in our personal lives and at work. And so, one of the elements of a cognitive budget, is that —what we talked about in the article— you really need to separate them. There are things to both reflect on and ruminations to avoid in your personal life and also at work. And at work in particular, rumination is especially costly.

It really meaningfully hurts your performance when you ruminate about the things at work that are making you unhappy. Measurably, this is validated and replicated, it's really bad for you at work. Finding ways to pull yourself out of
your workplace ruminations is just as important as pulling yourself out of your personal life ruminations.

The flip side are your points of reflection, the things that you want to think about. And so here, you're going to think through like, where are the areas of my life in which I will benefit from thinking, that doesn't mean things that are going to make me happy. You know, reflection is a really big deal in psychotherapy.

And when you are reflecting in psychotherapy, it is not to think about just happy things that make you pleased. Things that are worthy of reflection are not things that necessarily make you happy. It's things that will benefit you. And sometimes, it's thinking about things that you appreciate. Sometimes it’s forcing yourself to take time for gratitude. Sometimes it’s good to reflect on what you want to do with future vacations. But other times it might be, why does this person always make me angry? Now, if you were just thinking about this person is such a jerk, that's probably a rumination.

Why does this person make me so angry? That's reflection because there's something worthwhile to be gained, from understanding why this particular person triggers you. Because again, when we're at our best, no matter what another person's behavior might be, then we're able to say like, ah, this isn't about me.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yes, I love your example because it shows that making the list—

And I'm visualizing in your article, you have ruminations on one side and reflections on the other for people at work. And I want to go through one of those examples. However, you show that if you actually write down the reflection as a topic, then you go deeper into it.

Jordan Birnbaum: Exactly. And then you start to lean into fun behavioral science with nudging. So, what you learned in behavioral science is that, whatever ideas or concepts are most available to you, or most top of mind, they tend to really dominate our thinking. And so, one of the great ways that nudges can work is to affect what's called cognitive availability. What's top of mind?

And so, once you understand what you want to be reflecting on, you can start to create nudges for yourself to remind you, hey, reflect on this. And so, you might print out a little piece of paper and tape it to your computer screen, just so it's always there for you. You might set your alarm several times a day or get push
notifications from your to-do-list. Just reminding you to think about career development or more specifically think about whether you want to learn a new coding language, what are the benefits and the cost, and sending yourself reminders that these are the things that you want to think about, scheduling five-minute intervals to go for a walk and think about this particular topic.

The more that you can be intentional and the more that you can bring these things top of mind, the more likely you are to be successful and actually finding this space to reflect on the things that matter to you.

And then of course, as you are successful, they will change and they will evolve. And it's an important part of the cognitive budget. In fact, there's understanding, okay, when have I gotten all I can get from this? And now it's time to move on to something else, whether it's an extension or a totally different pivot.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** And then the creative behavior changes come when you're with the team trying to come up with those triggers so, the whole team can trigger itself, wait a minute, we're going down that hole, we always do or, I thought we're supposed to be reflecting on what strategy is going to be the most innovative for us. We have that and we keep avoiding it just as an example—

**Jordan Birnbaum:** Yeah, it's a great example. There are different ways. So, one of the things that we talk about in the article about how this applies at work into teams is that, you know, and just the work in organizational psychology, I think most people know that the team leader is overwhelmingly responsible for employee engagement.

One of the really hard realities about leadership in our world today is that, almost by definition, every leader has too much to do. And they've got strategies to develop and they've got execution to manage and then there's engaging their teams. And unfortunately, the last piece, often falls to the back, in part because it is the least tangible and most high functioning people really like—

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Which is what right now is all about. Engaging my team in a virtual and hybrid way.

**Jordan Birnbaum:** Precisely, but it is very easy for that to fall to the back of the line and so, one of the things that a leader can do that when they realize that their number one job is to get the most out of their team, and when they do realize that, their performance will fundamentally change. And then a great way to do that is to keep a cognitive budget where each direct report is on your list
for reflection. You should be reflecting about the particular needs of Sam, of Alex, of Derek, of Cassandra.

I know that Derek thrives when given the ability to extend his creativity into marketing. So let me find him side projects in that regard. I know that Sierra is really interested in growing her career in this direction. So let me look forward, think and keep top of mind how I'm going to keep Sierra motivated and engaged. And so, when you start writing that down and make that a priority for what you're doing each week, the amount of attention that you paid to your team fundamentally changes, as well, their performance.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** That is absolutely right. So, I was about to ask you for an example of what a leader might put in his or her cognitive budget. What would be a rumination that a leader would put on his or her budget?

**Jordan Birnbaum:** So, I think that ruminations are interesting concept from a group perspective. What I would say and what I talk a lot about in the article and ruminations are what are the hell holes that people fall into inside their brains. And so, I think what would be true for a leader would be true for an individual contributor, our rumination of, I'm not appreciated here. They don't value me. This isn't fair. I never get invited to the important meetings. I think all of us we could sit around and create like a drinking game around identifying workplace rumination—

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** We could—

**Jordan Birnbaum:** And we could get drunk really fast. It's just very easy for all of us to get sucked into those workplace ruminations. And we just need to understand that it literally affects your capacity to remember things like your memory gets worse when you ruminate. Literally become more ineffective at your job.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** As you said, you use up all that mental energy, you have none left.

**Jordan Birnbaum:** It's precisely right. It messes with your motivation and your own psyche, your own wellness. It spills over into your personal life—

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** And also, accountability. That's the other thing I loved about this. It makes the leader accountable and it makes the team accountable.

**Jordan Birnbaum:** For sure.
**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** All right. So, I asked you about this and you were going to use yourself as an example. How do you use it with your team? How do you say I'm using it?

**Jordan Birnbaum:** So, I think that for the team, the idea is just to encourage them to be more intentional with their thinking. I know enough from behavioral science about psychological reactants that whenever you try to force somebody to do anything, they immediately don't want to do it because they don't like the choice being made for them. So, I am not forcing it on anybody. But what I do talk about is, let's try to get cognizant of what are the things that matter to us, where we do want to be spending our time thinking about, relative to the business, relative to our individual careers, and also spend some time thinking about what are the rabbit holes that we go down that really don't serve us. And how can we start to understand?

Because when I have a single team mate who is in a bad ruminating space, that spills over to the entire team. So, what we really want in the most ideal world to your point earlier is we want a leader who can demonstrate vulnerability, and role model the right way for keeping themselves accountable so that filters down to the team, because in an ideal world, the team can help each other. And the teams can spot when someone is in a bad place, it just needs a lifeline, like get out of there. You're in a bad head space. You deserve better than that. All The things that you're ruminating about aren't actually true. Take a deep breath and let's focus on something else. And when you can create that kind of environment, that's management nirvana.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** How are your people reacting to this? Cause you're starting to talk this way with your folks?

**Jordan Birnbaum:** I am surrounded by behavioral science enthusiasts so it's kind of preaching to the choir here. And so, for us it's more— it's less about this being prescriptive. What are the points that I make in this— and I think it's true of all innovation— there's nothing new in the cognitive budget at all. Like it comes entirely from cognitive behavioral therapy, positive psychology and behavioral economics. And it's just a combination of those existing things. And so often, that's all that innovation is. It's just combining things in a new way.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yes.

**Jordan Birnbaum:** Precisely, and so, I think more, we kind of geek out about that. And we nerd out about the joy of finding a new way to combine things that actually has a new, application in the road.
Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Right, right. Well, I asked you this question and you were real honest with me and you said, I don't know yet. How are you going to share this? People are going to read this article, you may get phone calls saying, come into my company and help us do this.

Jordan Birnbaum: Well, also I would say that the good news is that I currently work for an unbelievable behavioral science insights agency. And so, we would be absolutely delighted. What's really fun about this is that where I work now, like, I'm kind of the dumbest guy in the room. All of my colleagues are incredible expert behavioral scientists. And so, even though I conceptualize this idea, they can actually speak to it even better than I can because they have an unbelievable capacity to connect both the brain chemistry and then the behavioral science that emerges from it.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: All right. Show me the training module, right? And it's not going to be that. I think it's going to be more, let's do it.

Jordan Birnbaum: Yeah. It's just a pretty easy grid. And so, I don't think the execution of the idea is at all complex. It really is just being convinced that it's worth a try. And, you know, there's some best tips for the way to do it. You don't want to write your ruminations out and leave them anywhere that other people can see them, you know, for things that will be widely available, you know, speaking code, you don't have to write everything out. Be thoughtful about how you do it, be thoughtful about where you place it. But ultimately, the real question is whether or not you are convinced that this is worthwhile. If you find the prospect of helping yourself to ruminate less and you're not willing to go see a cognitive behavioral therapist, which is probably actually the best thing that could possibly do this. But— for millions of people that's a non-starter. So, a great way to help yourself stop ruminating is to start writing your ruminations down.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Right.

Jordan Birnbaum: Just start there.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And I see this as going back to that nexus. It's a tool that brings it together. And without even going into all the wonderful background that we did in this podcast, folks can go, oh, this is interesting. I can use this for myself and my team and they can make a dent in being focused in their conversations. So, I just want you to know I'll be quoting a lot of your article in a chapter I am writing on dialogue in organizations because this is a guiding tool to have the right dialogue.
Jordan Birnbaum: Oh, unquestionably.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And this goes full circle to where we begin with targeted, mindful, tailored discussions, with our teams during these hybrid and virtual times. How can folks get in touch with you?

Jordan Birnbaum: Best way to find me is on LinkedIn, Jordan Birnbaum, where you'll see that quote, "Kindness is Cooler than Coolness." I love interacting and engaging with people there. So just shoot me a friend request or a direct message and I'll be so happy to dig into this stuff. And then, of course I'm now hard at work on my next piece for MIT-SMR, which I won't share too much, but we'll say it has a lot to do with the future and behavioral research.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Well, thank you so much. This has been wonderful. You gave us both the background and something very tangible that we can use. So, I encourage everyone, please look up the article. And begin to use it. Wanna thank everybody for being with us for this particular episode of Team Anywhere. And we look forward to seeing you next time, please share this podcast and many, many others from Team Anywhere. See you next time.