

# EP 87 - Andrew Bartlow: A Leader's Guide to Creating High-Growth Organizations

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

companies,

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** organizations,

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

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

Is your company or your team facing extraordinary growth? Are you looking for the best and brightest tools to support that growth? Well, maybe the answer isn't more tools. Maybe the answer is in getting greater focus on what you're trying to accomplish and building ways to connect your growing company to accomplish just that.

On today's podcast, we speak with Andrew Bartlow, who knows exactly what priorities you want to put in place for high-growth. In fact, he's the author of the award-winning book, "Scaling for Success: People Priorities for High-Growth Organizations".

Hello, and welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere, I'm your co-host on the West Coast, Mitch Simon. And on the East Coast our amazing co-host Dr. Virginia Bianco-Mathis. How are you doing today, Ginny?

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** I'm doing great.

**Mitch Simon:** Today on the podcast in the house we have Andrew Bartlow. Andrew is the Founder and Managing Partner of Series B Consulting, and is the co-author of "Scaling for Success: People Priorities for High-growth Organizations." Very excited to have you on the show, Andrew, 'cause a lot of

my clients are not in high-growth, but in super crazy high-growth. Welcome to the show.

**Andrew Bartlow:** Really pleased to be here with you. And you're right, it is crazy. Growth is crazy.

**Mitch Simon:** So, what we'd like to ask you is how have the last two crazy years been for you and what has surprised you the most?

**Andrew Bartlow:** Well, last two years for me in some ways we're not a change, even with the pandemic. I was working from my home office here. I have been writing and consulting for the past four years or so. So, I was used to getting electronic human contact rather than in person. It's hard to get me across the bridge and the San Francisco Bay area any longer.

But boy, the growth of my clients has been astronomical in here in the high-growth tech world of Silicon Valley and the San Francisco Bay, the wave of SPACs, the wave of IPOs, you know, rapid fundraising that has been intense for the people I work with and the human resources profession. In some ways, it's the golden age of HR. We're needed, we're called on, in more focused ways than maybe ever before. But also the demands are incredibly high and so I do a lot of work with HR professionals and a lot of mentoring. There's a lot of dropping out, burning out, and changing out for the people that do this type of work.

**Mitch Simon:** Yeah. You know, I love for you to comment a little bit about your company, which is called Series B Consulting. Really great name. And I love for you to comment on what happens such that HR professionals are in such high demand? Is it been over the last 20 years like we're trying to tell you that we're actually necessary and then boom [snaps finger] we're necessary. Like, what really happened there?

**Andrew Bartlow:** Well, the unprecedented changes to the working world. Bam! you've got to work from home. You can't come into the office and have human contact anymore. Okay. Well, how do we get work done in that environment? You know, HR give us the answer, even though we haven't lived through many pandemics either.

And then with that, the great resignation or the great reshuffling, depending how you talk about it. So, you know, talent is now more mobile in the remote world. And so how do you attract and retain talent in this workplace, in this current environment?

And along with all the very powerful social equity issues that have, you know, entered the public consciousness more and more, you know, HR gets tapped for all of those things, and they're all happening. It's the perfect storm. It's happening all at once.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** And I'd like to add just one more thing to that. The leadership skills that are necessary, they going to HR because of a new set is required. Wait a minute. How do I run this meeting in a hybrid way? How do I work with these people and help them be engaged? So again, they're running to HR for some of that.

**Andrew Bartlow:** Yeah, it's a really good thing and a lot of ways for the profession and it's a really challenging thing for HR leaders that, we ourselves aren't used to operating in this world. So, we're all figuring it out together.

**Mitch Simon:** Great. So let's dig in a little bit about creating high-growth companies in virtual and hybrid environments. As we are today, it's mostly virtual and it looks like we're moving slowly to hybrid. What are some of the things you must focus on knowing that in high-growth organizations, most of the employees now—I'm seeing what's a lot of companies work with, the majority of the new hires have never been in the office. So, I'm just wondering how you look at that and what kind of solutions you're looking at to get the newbies inculcated into a culture that never existed?

**Andrew Bartlow:** I'd say there are three really important elements and we could probably make it a longer list, but let's start with three. So one is work on the right things. Make sure it's really clear at your organization, what you're trying to accomplish and get those goals and initiatives cascaded and aligned as well as you possibly can. And that'll help your team be more successful. It'll help your team be happier. It'll help everything.

Number two, in an age where contact with your manager and peers is remote, don't slack off on the connection, on the feedback between managers and their teams. You ensure that you're checking in with your teams, having regular conversations with people that you're working with. Not just a social connection, but how are things going? Where are you at on this project? Are you feel like you need help on anything. If the walk-by, drive-by a hallway meeting isn't going to happen, you have to schedule it. Make sure that you're having contact with your people.

And number three, and I think you were potentially heading this way with the question, how do you build and maintain a culture in a remote world? I've seen

more and more examples. Salesforce just came out about this, where they have created a Leadership Center, where people will work remotely at Salesforce. They just spent billions and billions of dollars building this enormous skyscraper in San Francisco that now they're leaving empty and renting out the space. And instead they're flying people in from all over the world to go to the Redwoods in the South Bay of San Francisco to meet at a Leadership Center. And I think that is so powerful having a sense of place and a gathering location so that your teams can get together in a thoughtful, planned, productive way.

And boy, I remember my days at General Electric. We had the Crotonville Leadership Center in Connecticut and Washington Mutual, rest in peace, WaMu, at Cedar Brook up by SeaTac. I think more of these large— not just large employers, more employers will seek that sort of culture building sense of place and plan employee gatherings, not just parties, not just some band that, you know, a baseball field, but where can we go to get work done and build our culture.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Gatherings. I like that word. And when it makes sense with those people to get together.

**Andrew Bartlow:** Well, heck, you're spending the money anyway, going to some hotel in Vegas having your conference. Why don't you go to a central location that is your company, that has all your branding and all your history on the walls. And you're likely to bump into people in that leadership center from other groups that are also having meetings at the same time. Makes sense.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** It does.

**Mitch Simon:** That's great. Somebody in the real estate world is going to be buying and selling Crotonvilles. You know, I've been to the Deloitte Center in Dallas and it's phenomenal.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** And we have quite a few here in DC too, you know, just out in the farmlands and countryside.

**Mitch Simon:** Okay. Let's get to design. We're talking about real estate a little bit. You used to design your company by designing your floor space, right? We're going to put some cubes here. We're going to put offices in, some break rooms and some beanbag chairs and some ping pong tables. How do you best design companies today for hyper-growth, when again, they're not coming into the office? Like, what are the things that I need to really focus on to make sure I can handle the growth?

**Andrew Bartlow:** I just can't help thinking back to my days at General Mills where they did away with offices. And so Senior Vice Presidents were in cubes and bullpens, and that was all the rage back in the mid-nineties. Conversely, Sun Microsystems, I interviewed with them right out of grad school and everybody had an office. It was like an eight square foot-office. Big enough for your desk and you could touch all four walls sitting in your chair. Everybody had an office with a door that shut.

And outside the physical space environment, great question, how do you design it? I think largely you're designing how work gets done. Lot of my time and energy is spent working with leadership teams to articulate their most important goals and priorities, and then organize around how to deliver those.

So, it's less about physical space and it's more about your org chart or your resourcing or your workforce plan. How do you get stuff done? McKinsey has a new framework called the DARE. So, who's responsible for what and how do we interact with each other? Just be intentional about it. It's not rocket science, but you need to pay attention to it.

**Mitch Simon:** So, for hyper-growth, what are some of the things that you're finding are the things that people are doubling down on?

**Andrew Bartlow:** Well, hyper-growth companies as unique as they all purport to be, the special snowflake of unicorn organizations. Dragon is the new term, where it's, you know, a \$10 billion private company. Plenty of those running around nowadays.

I think what they're all faced with is there's too much to do. Not enough time. Not enough attention. Even if you're this incredibly well-funded unicorn, dragon or other mythical beast, the attention that's required to execute on a wide range of priorities that are often conflicting with the same people bottlenecking it, and high-growth organizations founders are often struggling to figure out how to empower their teams and align them. Prioritization is one of the largest challenges in high-growth. And in today's environment where you can't look on the wall at your top three things and the drop-ins don't happen, it's harder to maintain focus.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** And so then, what do you do?

**Andrew Bartlow:** Well, you need to be really intentional about it. I think whether you're in a physical office environment or remote office environment, Pete and Repeat again. So, what are those most important things that you're

trying to accomplish? Communicate that out. Reinforce that message time and time again.

We talk a lot about performance reviews and in the management space and human resources and they've come out of Vogue as well. What's really valuable rather than a once-a-year performance review is regular check-ins. I'm actually working right now is trading emails earlier today with the software development team in the Ukraine. There's lots happening in the Ukraine right now and I have a small software development team working on a performance management software for me.

I'm creating something because everything out there seems to be too bloated and too complicated. Let's just check in regularly. Have you had a one-on-one with your manager over the past month? Is that one-on-one useful or not useful? Yes or no? Do you feel like you need assistance? Yes or no? If you're doing some of those basics, do you know what the most important goals are for you over the next month or quarter?

If you're checking in on some of those things, you can manage quite a large organization much more effectively than have people just continue to guess or work on pet projects or jump to whatever urgent but non-important quadrant of the Eisenhower Matrix happens to be.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** And what I love about what you just said is because the question I often get is, okay, so we'll have these check-ins, what do I say? You know, that just always boggles my mind. You answered that question. You just gave four or five questions. I have to actually give them those questions. And that's okay. And then, they grow from there. But it's such a foreign concept. You have to give them the language.

**Mitch Simon:** Yeah. What I love is for prioritization is it's pretty simple. It's, one-on-ones. It's regular check-ins. And what do you think is the most important thing, then you have that prioritization. So yeah, it comes down to the simple in growth or hypergrowth. So my next question is, what are some areas where leaders today are failing to invest, and it's coming back to bite them?

**Andrew Bartlow:** With so many of the well-funded, high-growth companies I work with, I often find the opposite challenge is that they're investing in too many things. This wide range of projects, programs, employee events and activities without the focus needed. So what organizations are failing to invest in doesn't actually cost a lot of money. It's focus. Invest in focus and clarity.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** At connecting the dots, you know. They often do what we call, you know, throw mud at the wall. And the employee, wherever they are at home in the office gets hit with another glob. And they don't know, well, wait a minute, why is this topic being discussed or how does it connect to the very survey you took six months ago to the investment we were asked to do last week. Someone's got to coordinate those messages.

**Andrew Bartlow:** There's a saying that I'm using it a lot lately. I don't think I coined it though. "You can move 30 things an inch, or three things a mile". Chances are your organization will be better off if you're moving three things a mile.

**Mitch Simon:** In your experience, what are some of the things that people are doubling down on focusing on right now to help those of our listeners who are saying, well, what should I focus on in these high-growth environments?

**Andrew Bartlow:** Yeah. Well, let's start with communication. Start with having a really strong bi-directional communication framework. When are you doing an email update to the entire organization? When are you having an all-hands? When is there a skip-level? When is there a team meeting? How frequently are you doing one-on-ones? They're only about six or seven line items on that list that I just ran through. But if you can clarify, Hey, here's kind of our schedule and managers of people across this organization, whether it's 25 or 2,500, we expect you to do these things on a semi-regular basis.

So invest in communication. Don't need to have fancy graphics or spend a bunch of money, but do it. That's incredibly important in this dispersed work environment.

I'll go back to focus and clarity and those often go together. What are the most important things that the organization is working on? How do you prioritize against all the other stuff that's coming up on your plate? That's a great place to invest. It's hard to invest too much on focus and clarity.

I'd say third, planning. Especially high-growth organizations fall into the trap of saying things are moving too fast. It's unpredictable. I can't plan. Ooh. Wow. Boy, are you setting yourself up for a bumpy road? If you're not, at least attempting to help your team plan your resources, identify your priorities, what are you trying to accomplish over the next period of time?

**Mitch Simon:** I love that. It's simple.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** And that's the cornerstone we're hearing also for innovation. You've got to plan. You have to have dialogue around those things. And then even if it is moving too fast, the revisiting them becomes the magic.

**Mitch Simon:** Let's go into talent management or actually talent development. Okay, I'm working with a company which is basically doubling or tripling in size each year right now. Thank God for them. What are some of the ways that you've seen companies encourage talent development, especially in this virtual world?

**Andrew Bartlow:** Yeah, seen a lot of investment in third party spend. Reimbursement for individual workers selected training and learning programs. So instead of trying to build it all yourself, why recreate the wheel? There's more and more training, skill development, professional development options available remotely. Set a budget, reimburse, be generous about it.

**Mitch Simon:** Love it.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** And I'm finding a niche because it just happened that one of the faculty did a study on it, is in the vein that Andrew just pointed out, yes, let the employee choose. It's okay to give them some ideas and not the off-the-shelf stuff. Things that seminars online, but where there is a face-to-face, you know, you meet once a week for six weeks. Seems to be the favorite.

**Andrew Bartlow:** I started a program exactly like that. So thanks for mentioning the book. Growing out of the book, came an executive education program for heads of HR at high-growth companies. And so we run the equivalent of an executive MBA, over 16 weeks. We accept a very small group of people with some pretty intense reading and writing assignments and homework.

And we meet twice a week on video. And we've got a slack channel. And you're deep into this spending 5 to 10 hours a week for 16 weeks. And boy, people rave about it, how it's career changing and transformational. And, you know, I obviously think my program is pretty good. But there are other programs in different disciplines that the point is don't just attend webinars. Don't just buy downloadable products online. Like get engaged and do some active learning. And that can go a really long way.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** And then the learning triples, because as I'm sure you do in your program, you put people into groups and then they have to meet in

between, and it just cascades. And they start learning the skills in the course that are necessary now for the hybrid work back on the job.

**Andrew Bartlow:** That's right. There's a lot more willingness now to have remote delivery. And there are a number of startups in this space. I just went to my first and maybe only conference of the year, in Vegas of all places. It was HR transform. And you know, HR tech companies. So companies that are building technology that serve the workplace. Investors and HR leaders at high-tech companies all came together.

And boy, there are a bunch of organizations out there. Hone is one. There're a bunch of others that aren't top of mind. But delivered, blended learning. Remote delivered with a live human involved, doing the teaching and coaching can be really powerful. And for scaling organizations, don't try to do it yourself. Go find a vendor that has really high quality stuff off-the-shelf, and leverage their scale.

**Mitch Simon:** Great, let's talk about culture now. You've spent a lot of time actually talking about culture, clarity and one-on-one's, and communication, which really is the foundation of culture. What are some other ways that you've seen companies strengthen culture, as we started at the beginning of this podcast, where perhaps at the end of the year, you have more people that you don't know than you did know at the beginning of the year.

We're seeing that with a lot of companies where at the end of any year, 25% of the people were there at the beginning, but 75% of the people we're never. So what are you seeing that people kind of feel like, okay, I know this culture. It's established, even though it's pretty much brand new to the majority of people in it.

**Andrew Bartlow:** A few pretty tactical suggestions. One is articulate it very clearly in your employment value proposition to potential candidates. So, even during the interview process, you're talking about who we are and who we aren't. Have onboarding where it's not just, you know, here's your computer and your login, but here's how we operate. Here's what we espouse and what we aspire our culture to be.

Third is have some intentional gatherings. Maybe that's your offsite leadership center. Maybe you're going to Vegas. Whatever it is, have some intentional gathering so people can experience each other. I have a somewhat controversial opinion on mission, vision, values, purpose that I'd love to talk about for a minute, if we have time—

**Mitch Simon:** I love that! We like controversy here.

**Andrew Bartlow:** Well, great. I feel like so many organizations spend so much time wordsmithing mission, vision, values, statement, or purpose that ultimately mean nothing. That's ultimately just words that people get quizzed on and forget and you know, it doesn't really stick with you because you're trying to be inoffensive to everyone.

**Mitch Simon:** That's right.

**Andrew Bartlow:** You're trying to be inclusive to everyone in your mission, vision, values, culture. And where culture can be really powerful is where you're differentiating, where you are making some choices and saying here's who we are and here's who we're not. And this is the type of worker that will really connect with us and do really well and if you don't want to sign up for that, don't need to. And so, I would just encourage organizations not to get caught into that black hole of wordsmithing fancy marketing slogans that you intend to put on people's mouse pads. And focus more on who are we really, and what is differentiating about that, build programs and processes around it.

A couple examples. I hear all the time, we're a work hard, play hard culture. Okay, what does that really mean? Does that mean that you are reimbursing people for childcare expenses so that they can work longer hours? That's a great program that supports that concept.

Play hard is a little scary. All sorts of bad stuff can happen in those environments. You can support it through your gathering activities. So when we're going to gather, there's going to be some element of fun involved with that. Please don't involve the alcohol that tends to lead down all sorts of weird roads. But whatever you are trying to drive, you'll think about it in the context of your employment value proposition.

Why would somebody want to come work for you? Why would somebody want to stay? Who were the workers that we want to attract? And realize that if you're doing this well, you're not going to appeal to everyone equally.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** It's something I do. And Andrew, I don't know how you foster that, asking the kinds of questions that you just said makes it come, you know, what do you mean that you don't have in the old days, a closed door policy? What if I knock on it? Right? So, you love to do that. You challenge it. I don't even do vision, mission anymore. I just do let's create the future scenario. Let's create that picture. What are you doing? What are you all saying? What do

they say about you in the newspaper article that just came out? You know, let's create the painting.

**Andrew Bartlow:** I'll give another example. I talked about Washington Mutual and my great experience with them. They're now part of JP Morgan Chase. Got gobbled up during the financial services crises and the mortgage meltdown. Boy, I've had some laps around that track.

But when I was at WaMu, I've led a large recruiting team and the purpose of this recruiting team was to go hire commissioned salespeople. And they wanted to hire the best pound for pound sales team in the mortgage industry. And so that meant the highest producers.

So, they wanted to have potentially fewer people, but really as many as possible, that were high producers. So, the question is how do you build a culture? How do you build programs, processes, and policies that appeal to that ideal worker?

Well, what motivates that worker? Well, guess what? They want to get paid. They're commissioned salespeople.

So, take a look at the commission grid and put it side by side against your five largest competitors for that talent, and beat your competitors on that and give your recruiting team those resources to show, look we're, you know, 10% higher. We're going to pay the low producers less. We're going to pay the high producers more. Come work for us. You get paid more.

The other thing that they wanted was support staff. Hey, there's a lot of paper pushing in the mortgage world. If you haven't refied lately, please do. Seems like rates are going up. A lot of paper pushing. So, what they wanted were assistants. They wanted sales support coordinators. They wanted loan processing administrators.

And so, WaMu put their money where their mouth was and said, hey, if you produce above X level, we will pay. We guarantee that we will pay for a support resource for you or two or three or whatever. That goes beyond culture. That's your whole EVP. What are you doing to appeal to the type of worker that you want at your organization? We were wildly successful doing that. Maybe, too successful in that we were selling lots of loans that ended up being a little risky.

**Mitch Simon:** All right. So let's round this out and let's ask you then Andrew, first of all, how can we get your book, "Scaling for Success: People Priorities for high-growth Organizations," and where can we find you at Series B Consulting?

**Andrew Bartlow:** Well, thanks for asking. Yeah. Scaling for Success, you can find it on Amazon. There's a Kindle version. There's an audiobook version. You can also go to the publishers website, Columbia University Press. Really pleased that they agreed to publish this work.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yes, congrats, yes.

**Andrew Bartlow:** Yeah, thank you. It's up for a couple of awards.

And then you can, you know, please follow me on LinkedIn, Andrew Bartlow— not a whole lot of us out there. And you can check out my website, Series B Consulting or the Exec Ed program. I referred to a people leader accelerator.

**Mitch Simon:** Very informative and very straight to the point. I'm walking away with, you know, it's clarity, it's connection and it's culture, and foremost is prioritization. And make sure everyone in the team knows that and you can grow fast.

Well, thank you so much, Andrew. Thank you so much, Ginny. And thank you to our incredible audience and listeners. And if you love this, which I did, please share this with your friends and colleagues, and we'll see you next time on our next episode of Team Anywhere.