

[Transcript] Lenny's Podcast: Product | Growth | Career / Brian Balfour: 10 lessons on career, growth, and life

I think historically I've gotten really caught in this trap where at any moment in reformed, it's like, ah, if I just solve this one thing, this X problem, everything's going to get easier. That might be landing like some big hire, some executive hire or figuring out, you know, some major lever or defining like some strategy. But the reality is that the opposite is true. The more problems you solve, you just end up taking on bigger and bigger problems over time. And hoping it gets easier is the thing that just sets you up for this frustration, this anxiety, this stress. And I think switching to that mentality of like getting rid of that hope and more of like, if I solve this thing, I get to take on an even harder thing, I think is the thing that actually reduces the stress.

Today, my guest is Brian Balfour. Brian is the founder and CEO of Reforge, which is by far the best place in the world to get in-depth training on growth and product and related topics. Previously, Brian was VP of growth at HubSpot, co-founder of three other startups. And in my mind, Brian is the sensei of growth. With Brian on the podcast, I wanted to do something special. So, instead of going into the typical stuff that he writes about and speaks about, we instead talked through 10 of the biggest and most interesting lessons Brian has learned from his career and from his life. These come from a list that he keeps, where he gathers lessons that he learns over time, which turns out is over 100. We only have time for 10. There is so much gold in this episode. And I believe there is something for everyone. I can't wait for you to listen to it and to hear what you think. With that, I bring you Brian Balfour after a short word from our sponsors.

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You've heard me talk about how Koda is the doc that brings it all together, and how it can help your team run smoother and be more efficient. I know this firsthand, because Koda does that for me. I use Koda every day to wrangle my newsletter content calendar, my interview notes for podcasts, and to coordinate my sponsors.

More recently, I actually wrote a whole post on how Koda's product team operates, and within that post, they shared a dozen templates that they use internally to run

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their product team, including managing the roadmap, their OKR process, getting internal feedback, and essentially, their whole product development process is done within Koda. If your team's work is spread out across different documents and spreadsheets and a stack of workflow tools, that's why you need Koda. Koda puts data in one centralized location, regardless of format, eliminating roadblocks that can slow your team down. Koda allows your team to operate on the same information and collaborate in one place. Take advantage of this special limited time offer just for startups. Sign up today at koda.io slash Lenny, and get a thousand dollar startup credit on your first statement at cod.io slash Lenny to sign up and get a startup credit of \$1,000, koda.io slash Lenny. Brian, thank you so much for being here, and welcome to the podcast.

Thanks for having me.

So instead of going deep on the typical topics you go into, growth loops and frameworks and all that kind of stuff, what we're going to do is we're going to go through 10 of the most important, interesting, unique lessons that you've learned from your career, your work, and your job.

And as we were aligning on these topics, I learned that you keep this notion doc of lessons that you learn throughout your work. Tell us about this notion doc.

I think one of the things that I've learned over time for me, I don't know about you, is that I just don't tend to remember things unless I write them down.

And in an effort to not repeat mistakes, I basically just started keeping this notion doc that I call lessons learned. And some of these are from things that I've picked up from others, as we'll talk about. Some are things that I've learned the hard way. Like myself, they're kind of OG Brian lessons, and some of them from others, but I've experienced all of them in some way, shape, or form. And what I do is I literally write down a one liner of what the lesson is, and then a few sentence description. And then the way I use this is that whenever I'm thinking about a big maybe strategic question at Reforge or something else, I kind of return to this notion doc. And usually it's like two or three lessons jump out to me as relevant to that specific situation, and help either unblock me or guide me to a better answer or one of those pieces. And so I started only doing this, maybe I call it a few years ago. And I think there's 100 and some lessons in there at this point, which so we're not only working on the cover, like maybe 10% percent of them today. But I found it very useful just as a mechanism to unblock or ignite some new thoughts when I'm getting stuck.

I love that we have 10 more episodes we can do after this to go through all of them.

There you go. It's also amazing that you do two things that people wish they did. Like I imagine everybody wished they had a list of all their lessons. It's like, oh, I should have been doing this. And then you actually use them, which is also the thing most people don't do if they have a list like this. So it's pretty incredible. They actually find a way to optimize it.

That's why you have to keep it light. That's what I learned because when I read books, I used to take a ton of notes and all that kind of stuff. But it's not only creation friction, but it creates friction in actually using it as well. Because then it's like I got to sift through all of these notes. And so now I'm just like, well, what is the one liner? What is the essence of this thing, whether it comes from a podcast or a book or a conversation I've had, like those types of things. And so that's what I found is it's quick to create, quick to return to, reducing friction. Maybe that should be the number one growth lesson

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we should talk about. But yeah, that ends up being the key.

Amazing. Okay, well, let's just get into it. What is lesson number one?

I think the first ones we're going to cover are more related to startups, founder life, company, which I've been in the seat in the past seven years as founder CEO of Reforge. We'll cover some growth ones later. But one of them that I have just felt so strongly with in my entire career and what a lot of Reforge was founded on, but I didn't find the words for until I was listening to something by Frank Slutman is just inspect the work and not the person. And what that really means is, and the way that kind of Frank puts it is,

I just think it's really hard to judge a person from a conversation, whether that's a hiring conversation, a performance conversation, or something else. Like that just like never resonated with me. And what it's saying instead is like actually trying to draw a conclusion just from a conversation is honestly like kind of bullshit. You just have like all these biases involved. And instead of trying to just inspect the person from the conversation, it's like how do you go to the work? Like how do you see what their output is, the things that they've either historically created or currently created, because that's in the work environment. Ultimately, the thing that shows you what this person is capable of, like how they approach the work, who they work with, all of these things that are much more meaningful signal than asking tell me about a tough situation you faced in your career, those types of things. And so I've always applied this from day one of reforge of like, even in our hiring combos, 80 to 90% of the decision is based on either some type of portfolio review or some type of what we call a simulation. A lot of people call them exercises. And I get a lot of pushback from that internally from my team, because it's a lot of work to come up with these things. It creates friction in the hiring pipeline, like all of these types of things. But every time I've like made an exception on one of those things and said, okay, not do it. I have regretted it. I have flat out regretted it. And so I think this is one of those things is like when you're actually trying to make a decision, so much of our work is based around people trying to judge a person or come to a decision just from a conversation on the surface, almost always misleads you. And instead, it's really like, just how do you just go look at the work, the actual assets and things that they have helped create and bring to life in this world? Because I think that tells you so much more about the person. You touched on this is useful for hiring, but also performance, like how they're doing at the job, right? There's always just like, here's what I've done, but you look at what they've done. It's like, yeah, well, because even, you know, especially as a company grows, you know, there's all sorts of processes to put somebody up for a promotion and all that kind of stuff. And the way a lot of those processes are designed as the individual that's going up for promotion tries to like tell a story about what they have accomplished. And then the manager's going, you know, to advocate for them. And I think in that process, there's just too many opportunities to either twist what actually happened or there's all sorts of biases that end up involving. And so me as a potential decision maker on a yes or no on that decision, all I have to go off of, you know, being multiple steps away from this person's work is essentially these words that are being promoted. And how can I actually make an accurate yes or no decision on that? I can't. And it works in the reverse direction too. People who are doing amazing work, but maybe not the best at advocating for themselves, or maybe have managers that aren't doing the best job at advocating for themselves, end up feeling, you know,

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disenfranchised and like forgotten in a lot of, you know, just like a lot of bad feelings emerge. And that's how you lose essentially these really talented people. So even in processes like that, it's like, how do you surface the person's work over the past time period so that the ultimate decision maker can look at that work kind of go straight to the source rather than relying on this game of telephone that's happening as well. And so, you know, something that we've started to try to implement at Reforged, what we're doing it very slowly is building in regular processes for people to record the work that they've accomplished internally, kind of keep a log of it, the things that they've helped create in ship, so that when it comes to those conversations, it's already easily packaged and can be surfaced as part of that process. So I think this works in, it works in a bunch of different avenues, but it just kind of comes back, there's so much more you can glean from inspecting the actual creations of somebody than just like a surface level conversation. Amazing. Just one more question before we get to our next lesson. Along that same line you just mentioned, I've just like had to actually do this. So you mentioned like exercises in the interview. I think the extreme of that is something linear does, which I recently learned about where they have a work trial where they work with the team for like five days, one to five days. You just mentioned keeping track of your wins. Is there anything else you can share of just like how you actually implement this sort of lesson? Well, I don't, I think it's not even wins. It's like a log of what you've helped ship and your role in that, in that piece. Because even if it's not a win, right, it's possible that you did some really amazing work, but there's all sorts of other possible circumstances for why it ended up not being a win. And that's kind of, that's also what gets lost, I think, a lot in these, a lot in these processes is that somebody could be doing really amazing work, but maybe it's not an obvious win from the metrics or some other perspective, however else it's being judged. And you just, you just never, you never do that. And so I think where we started with this, the question is, is how do you make it super lightweight? And I think internally what we've been trying is, and we've been trying to figure this out is it's not about, you know, writing a book about your work every couple of weeks, right? It's like grabbing a couple screenshots and writing down a few bullet points of how you participated in creating and shipping this piece. I would also say that it, this also keeps the emphasis on things that have shipped to end customers, which is the ultimate goal of most functions, you know, finance is a little bit different, like some of these internal functions, where their customers are the internal employees, versus, I think, we even had a pattern of this in the past that reforges people put a lot of emphasis on creating like the awesome internal document. And it's like, look, you can create an awesome internal document. But if you're ultimately not, and that's not translating to shipping something that's impacting the customer, that's a loss for the company. And I think once again, a lot gets, gets caught up in these, these processes of where the judgment gets placed in the place in the wrong places. The last and the quick plug is, you know, reforges created this product called artifacts, which is a place to both store and showcase the things you've actually created in your work, you know, you can think about it as like a portfolio or GitHub for everybody. And that could be, look, if you're a manager and creating performance review processes or career ladders or interview simulations, all these types of things, that is work that showcases what you're capable of as a leader or manager, or you might be an individual PM and be involved in shipping a feature. And, and so we've created that place to not only store and showcase that

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stuff, but for folks that are coming along and solving a similar problem after you, they can use those things as ingredients to potentially solve, you know, their problem in a, in a slightly similar, but different way as well, similar to like open source code.

On artifacts, how do people find that? You can just go to reforge.com and sign up. It's right there on the, on the homepage. You can also just go to artifacts.reforge.com. And I have a bunch of mine posted up there, including like the original doc I wrote for my hypothesis around reforge seven years ago. It's like, it's an interesting blast from the past around that to see like what I got right, what I got wrong, and some of the lessons we'll talk more about today.

Awesome. Okay. And we'll link to that in the show notes. Okay. Lesson one, inspect the work, not the person. What is lesson two?

Lesson two, tell me what it takes to win, then tell me the costs. And I couldn't remember quite where I picked this up, the language for this up. It might be from Bezos. So somebody, you know, some listener can probably credit it for me, but a problem that I've experienced, especially as my team at HubSpotGru or the team at Reforge has grown is that as the team grows, a lot more of the initiatives and ideas obviously come bottoms up from the organization. But oftentimes by the time it would get to me, the person would have taken an approach or all of these filters would have gotten put in place. They would be thinking, well, I don't want to, I don't want to propose something that's going to get, you know, denied or this might sound a little bit too wild. And I don't want I don't want to be like interpreted that way. Or, you know, somebody else in the organization told me that this is going to be a lot of hard work, right? And so by the time it gets to the person that is either greenlighting the project or funding the project or making that decision, it loses the ultimate thing that you need to achieve, which is in startups, you basically just have to do whatever it takes to win. And so the saying is like, well, just tell me that first.

And then we can, even if the costs seem really high, now, now we can collaborate on what might be a way to approach this where the costs aren't so low. But I don't want my team spending time on watered down things that aren't going to ultimately help us win. That's just like a waste of time and a waste of resources. I would rather be having the conversation on, well, here's what I think it's going to take to win at this particular item. Now we can be having the conversation of, well, how do we actually go do that? That's the conversation I want to be having. But if I've got to be pushing the team of like, Hey, like this is too conservative, or this isn't going to be enough. Or I don't know if it's going to be worth the resources. I don't want to be pushing the team. I want the team pushing me. And then we can start to pair it back to figure out how to actually achieve this thing. This touches on a lesson that comes up a lot on this podcast is this idea of working backwards from the ideal instead of working forwards and incrementally getting to something. And then it's just like, here's the perfect world. What would it take to get there? Maybe we'll never get there. But it's a nice forcing function. In my 100 or so lessons, I have a different version of that. That one is, which is, yeah, I kind of define the ideal end state and then iterate towards it. That ends up being a little bit tricky in teams to implement because people can very much attach themselves to that ideal end state. But the thing is, you have to revisit that ideal end state every so often and revise and update and iterate on that as well. Because you identify, you define this thing, you iterate towards it, you learn some things, and you're like, that ideal end state isn't quite right, or I need to push the horizon out a little bit more. And so I need to update and redefine it. But so the key on those things is,

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how do you land that ideal end state to align the team to iterate forwards it? But not in a way where folks are like, well, the pixels didn't end up like this. Or we said we were going to build this exact feature, but you said x, but we're actually now doing y. And it's really hard to land that in between of, we're not going to do this exact set of things. And this is about directional alignment. But we want you to work towards making this thing a reality. And then the second part is just finding the time to take the step back to re-update that ideal end state. I think that's the other component of that, that there's a lot of friction there. It's just hard to find that time in those types of things. But I actually think that is a better version of yearly planning than what most people do with OKRs and stuff. I think most people would be better served, just working in product visuals saying, ooh, how might we want the product or the user to experience the product a year from now and giving that to the team? That is way more meaningful, I think, for folks, those visuals than a nicely formatted set of OKRs.

Wow. I love that. Do you work that way? Do you try to work that way?

We started working this way about, I'd say, like four or five months ago. We went through a few crazy years at Reforge where everything we were shipping was working and we were just trying to keep up with all of the growth. And then, of course, when all the macro stuff hit a year or so ago, we were kind of in the bullseye of it being in the L&D space, a lot of our customers and tech, like all of these types of components. And I think in that crazy period, we had taken multiple shots at different planning processes, and they were all disasters.

Oh, no. They were all disasters. And we had so many smart people around the table who had gone through these processes before. But I think when you're in that incredibly fast growing stage or you're in the earliest stage where you're landing a bunch of new bets that are a bit ambiguous and it's more like product market fit mode kind of closer to that end of the spectrum,

I think you're much better served by incredibly light planning processes where 80 to 90% of the assets produced are actual visuals of the experience. It doesn't have to be product visuals either. I've started forcing teams to, marketing teams to show me what the potential marketing assets might be rather than giving me an ocean dock. Or we do a bunch of stuff on the supply side of our network. And I'm like, well, what is a customer facing asset? How might they experience this? Because we're going to have a way more productive conversation over that type of asset than a bunch of words on an ocean dock. And so we have started working like this in the past six months. We found it way more effective. Now, how long that can last and how long that can scale?

Huge question mark, right? All of these processes, OKRs, all these kinds of things, they've been created for a reason in scale, but I think where we're at as a company, 75 people still landing a bunch of new product bets, trying to iterate, ship quickly, keep the coordination costs down low, all those types of things, we're finding this method to be far more effective.

And it doesn't matter if it can't scale because you're going to change it anyway, right? Like the way I thought about planning always just like it's like the best idea you have at the time. Let's just do it this way. Yes. Org and strategy. Like this is the best idea right now. We're going to rethink it anyway in six months if things are going well, especially if they're not going well.

Yeah. And that's why you want to get it out as fast as possible, right? Whereas I think in a lot of planning processes, you get those things out really fast. And then 80% of the process is like churning on the last little bits that ultimately don't matter in the end, right? And I think that's the piece that feels just awful to the team and it makes these things drag on for a really

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long time. It's also what gets people really attached to the plan and more upset when you ultimately do change things like you're saying. So I think that's why you need to find methods to just get those big chunks out incredibly quickly and then move on, right? Move on, start shipping, start iterating towards that ideal end state because that's going to help you update whatever that new ideal end state will be in the future. There's always bonus lessons that are coming up as we're going through these lessons. But just to close the loop on this lesson, it was tell me what it takes to win and then tell me the costs. Nailed it.

What is lesson number three? Lessons number three is like a hard one that I've learned the hard way and I'm still trying to improve that myself. And this one's very much for founders, which is just problems never end and that's okay. Here's what I've personally experienced and I've talked to a lot of founders about this as well. I think historically I've gotten really caught in this trap where at any moment in Reforge, it's like, ah, if I just solve this one thing, this X problem, everything's going to get easier. That might be landing like some big hire, some executive hire, or figuring out, you know, some major lever or defining like some strategy. But the reality is that the opposite is true. The more problems you solve, you just end up taking on bigger and bigger problems over time. And hoping it gets easier is the thing that just sets you up for this frustration, this anxiety, this stress. And I think switching to that mentality of like getting rid of that hope and more of like, if I solve this thing, I get to take on an even harder thing, I think is the thing that actually reduces the stress. And so this was a one that I've also felt like for many, many years, but had a tough time finding the words for. And then Ray Dalio had this passage in one of his books that just like hit the bull's eye. And so his passage, which we've actually worked into the cultural values at Reforge, is every day there's going to be problems, some big, others small, sometimes in waves, sometimes slowly, but they're never going to end. The more successful we are, the bigger our problems will be. And how we react to those problems is up to us to achieve our goals. Each individual must be a problem solving machine. He calls it the problem solving machine. I think there's some adaptations in there. But I thought that like captured it so well. And, you know, when I find myself getting caught in this, oh, if we just solve this one thing, life will be so much easier. I kind of return to this statement, not only to remind myself that that's not true, but to try to like switch my framing around of how to think about the problem. But learning this is like a, it's a grind. It's a hard mentality switch for, I think, a lot of founders. This reminds me a number of things. One is just, I heard someone describe basically any leadership job as your professional firefighter. You're just putting out fires all day. It is true. It is true because like, those are the things that bubble up, right? The things that are going easy, the things that are going great do not bubble up, right? And so as a result, yeah, you end up being like this catcher for all of the problems. And I think that's why a lot of people end up in these management and leadership roles. And then they just hate them. They're not good at them. And they're not good at them because they don't like it. Both of those things end up being true. And a lot of that has just been driven by our construct of how people think they have, what they have to do in order to progress in their careers is like the only way to progress in my career is through management. And there's three components of that, right? There's title, right? Like most people view that as a higher social capital thing. Most people say that's the only way that I can get higher compensation as part of that, as well as getting more compelling roles

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in my career. So this is also something that we've recently changed in the past six months at Reforge, which is through a lot of the macroeconomic changes, we massively flatten the org. We converted a lot of managers back into what we call Captain IC roles. Captain IC, ooh. Yeah. We have this framework called Players Coaches Captains. We talk about a little bit of the differences. And it helps kind of distinguish the different type of leadership between a senior IC and a manager. A manager is more of a coach. They're kind of coaching from the sidelines. And IC is like leading from buying, being on the playing field. And those two things are very different. We kind of put that in place. We changed our entire compensation structure so that there is zero compensation trade-off, whether you just want to keep growing as I see and stuff. There's more of these Captain roles internally than there are manager roles internally. We've created the same titles for all of the levels so people don't feel like they're making a trade-off on that external signaling factor. We give all the strategic problems to the Captain level IC roles that managers and coaches are purely around hiring, coaching, positioning players on the field, identifying problems, but then handing those problems off for others to go solve, all of these types of things. But one of those things that's really bothered me for a long time is that you end up on this manager death cycle where when people think that's the only way that they can progress or the only way that they don't have to make these trade-offs, you end up with a lot of folks in those roles who are neither good at them or don't really want to do at them. And oh, by the way, you've also taken your star IC players off the field in the process of all of that. And then they go and just repeat the cycle, right? They create meetings and processes and all those things because that's what managers are supposed to do. And then they coach their team as like that's the way you progress in this organ. The whole thing repeats itself and ends up being a really big mess. And so I think a lot of these principles are not new, especially in software engineering. I think that's where they've been around the longest. But we've applied it to every single function within the organization. And I think we'll take further steps in the future to even like compensate the captain IC roles higher than the managers to essentially really provide a counteracting force. And people have to make a negative trade-off to become a manager to make sure that people who end up in those roles are the ones who truly want to be there and truly do that type of work and be like the problem catcher, you know, that type of work as part of it. I feel like this also just like a very common theme now across companies. I feel like if you haven't written about this, I think just sharing this in depth would be really useful to a lot of people because I think a lot of startups are trying to think about this. I think a lot of folks have really come to this realization, you know, through some of these hard times where a lot of pressure gets put on prioritization and budget cuts and stuff. But I would also say I would go as far to say is I think this is where the world is headed. All of this AI tooling is going to give these like super ICs, these captain level ICs, even more leverage in solving problems and their creation abilities as part of that. And so I think in the future what we're going to see, and I'm not the first one to say this, there have been others like Scott Belsky and others that have written about this, which is just, I think the future is actually companies that are, they're much smaller teams where, you know, all these AI tools are giving one person a wider set of creation abilities. And as a result, you don't need as many people to solve the same size problem as you once do. And that's great. There's less coordination. There's less all of the things

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that people end up hating their jobs over, whether that's, you know, writing updates and, you know, reviews and like all of that type of stuff. I think it's a very positive thing. And as a result, we're going to see happier people, happier companies and more creative output as part of it. And so I don't know. I think this is where the future, I think the future favors these super IC types over those, over the manager types.

I'm so curious if that's how it ends up playing out. Like it all makes sense that that's where things would head if AI gets powerful enough. But there's also these incentives that just drive companies to hire. It's like, oh, right, we could do more. Why don't we hire more engineers? Oh, we could build this team. We could go faster. It is so hard. This is something we've also put in our cultural values, which is we just the our second cultural values, small teams do bigger things. And we have some guidelines on there of like, we only add somebody to the project when we feel like it's absolutely necessary. We know what the right next steps are, like all those types of things. But I think if you could sum up the last two years is that we basically funneled a ton of capital and people into things that were kind of working, but not like fully working. And I think that's where a lot of companies found themselves, including Reforge, we funded some of those things and we had to we had to unwind them. Which makes sense. Like as a company, you're looking for new things that will grow and become huge opportunities. So I don't think there's anything wrong with that, right? It's like, we're just going to plant all these seeds, we're going to try stuff, see if anything blows up, and then we double down. So like in a good way. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So I think it's really normal. Yeah. Right. Like I think a lot of people diss like all these companies investing in all these new ideas and random things when like, that's really how you you build another business seed line, or you find an unlock for growth, right? That's like pretty normal. Totally. When we went from one product to multi product at HubSpot, we seeded multiple bets at once. And only like a couple of them ended up making it through the filter, which ended up being the CRM and the sales tool as part of that. And then there was projects we ended up killing and unwinding as part of that. But the key about each of those bets was that we seeded each of those bets with a very limited amount of funding in a very small team. Like there was still the constraints involved. And I think where the mistake ends up happening is like, you kind of have this thing that's working, but not really. And because you've got all these other people sitting on the sidelines or this cash sitting on the sidelines, you end up piling that stuff in there. And when you tend to add those things to stuff that are only kind of working, it gets worse. It doesn't get better. And that ends up creating a lot of issues.

Which is that value? What is it that you have about small teams?

Yeah, just small teams do bigger things. We felt like we needed to like encode this in us to be like a forcing, you know, to be a forcing function for us going forward.

All right, all these bonus lessons, you're just full of lessons, Brian. So I'm going to close the loop on lesson three, which is problems never end and that's okay.

All right, lesson four.

All right, now we're getting into the product and growth lessons. This one I actually learned at HubSpot, which was the year is made in the first six months. And where this really comes from is that I think, especially when you're going through planning or thinking about growth and milestones and hitting those goals and looking forward in that way is that this is particularly relevant as everybody's probably going through yearly planning right now. I've seen a lot of

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plans where you realize in the first three to six months, you kind of have a line of sight to what the constraints are and what you can actually do and the limitations of those things. And so in the first three to six months of a year, your growth goals end up being kind of realistic, kind of on target. But then you're like, oh, I've got to hit this ambitious target. So I'm going to build, you know, this inflection point in the back half of the year to like hit that goal. The reality is, is like, that's just not how it works. To make your year, it's really about the first six months and the things you accomplish in those first six months. And the reason is this for quite a few products, most products, this isn't true for all products, is that the buying cycle or the decision window for a lot of customers is so long that by the time you get to the second half, and you do the calculation of like, well, if we put this thing in place and the time it takes to impact a customer, and then the time it takes for that customer to make the buying decision, you're already into the next year, right? When you put those things in, this is really true for SaaS, right? Where the buying windows could be anything from a few months to up to like a year long, depending on what type of market that you're tackling. And so if you don't do the things in the first six months, the options you're left with to actually influence the numbers in the back six months of the year is incredibly small, incredibly, incredibly small. Now, this might be different for, you know, a consumer social product where the friction is very low and there is no buying things and maybe I can pull some levers like paid acquisition or stuff that have really short time windows. But even in those products, when those products tend to be more influenced by things like viral loops and working on engagement and retention, the amount of times it takes to build and ship those things and then have it propagate through the user base and actually impact your numbers ends up being longer than most people think about when they're thinking through the next, like the next year. And so anyways, if you want to hit your year numbered, it's all about the first six months. Otherwise, you're being a little bit unrealistic with these very, you know, back weighted second half plans. Something you didn't mention, which is also just reorgs, like you often just like rethink everything halfway through, right? Like, oh, shit, the world has changed. And so you're probably not even going to get to that back half the way planned. Yeah, that's fair. I think it's just a human tendency to essentially overestimate how fast, not only how fast you can do something, but how fast it will take in effect, especially this becomes even bigger, the larger your customer base becomes, right? Because the larger the baseline you're working with, the larger the number you need on the new thing to actually show a meaningful impact. And so I think it's just very easy for us to overestimate those things when we're going through that type of forward-looking thinking. Awesome. Okay. Lesson four, the year is made in the first six months. What is lesson five? Okay, this is probably one that I think about the most. It comes up the most often, not only in reformed courses, but in like investing and advising, which is growth is a system between acquisition of retention and monetization. You change one, you affect them all. We've written about this a ton. You've written about this to some degree. But I think people underestimate how deep this lesson goes. And it's not just about understanding your system, which is the growth model, understanding that if you do change one thing, you have to change the other one.

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But it's also understanding like when you have a problem in one area, sometimes the solution is in a different part of the system, right? So a lot of times retention problems are created because you're acquiring the wrong folks. Or a lot of times monetization issues are stemming from engagement problems. And so what I've often found teams to really do is that they narrow, they identify the problem, which is like, hey, we might have low revenue retention or low revenue conversion or something like that. And they go straight to, okay, trying to work on levers within that specific part of the system. But without taking the step back to say, well, actually, what part of the system is creating this problem? It might actually be something within that maybe we just have terrible pricing pages or something of that nature or terrible dunning flows. But I think oftentimes the actual solution, the actual lever to move that problem ends up being in a different part of the system. And so this system type of thinking is probably the number one thing that I think separates great folks who work on growth from like your average good folks. I think the average good folks get all of the simple levers of like how to reduce friction, increase reward, they might understand things around growth loops, all that type of stuff. But system level thinking is I think the thing that separates the great from the good, even more so in marketplace and network products because the system dynamics are, you know, amped up multiple time degrees. Yeah. I'm curious if there's an example that comes to mind either at Reforge or at HubSpot. I'll share one from Airbnb that you made me think about. There was a team at one point on Airbnb that was just like focused on retention, guest retention. They're just like, how do we get people to travel more and come back to Airbnb more? And they did all this work, all this analysis, and they just found it's related to how good was their trip. And so it became a thing that they're like, okay, there's not much we can do as a retention team. We got to focus on trip quality and host quality. And that actually led to creating a team and putting more resources into let's improve trip experience, which was mostly around host response rate, reviews, things like that. And so it was just like, okay, this team should not exist. We should not have a retention team. We should work on trip experience. So examples, I think early HubSpot sales days, you know, the renewal figures on our early paid product were like only okay. And I think the team we initially wanted to work on, well, what feature could we add to all of these things? But when we actually went into customer combos, what we found was that a lot of the people that the sales team were selling to ended up being either not the persona that we ended up building for, or they were selling a use case that we actually had them designed for. And that's because, look, salespeople are there. They're cranking, right? They're just trying to close deals, which he's like, that's what their role there is for. And so at some point, we had to redesign the incentives for the sales team. I don't remember exactly how it worked, but I think we did something as drastic at some point as saying, hey, like if you sell this type of persona or this type of company, you will not get comped on it, right? And that immediately changed behavior, right? And we started selling the right. So that was an example where engagement and retention problems were created up at the top or up at the top of the funnel. Similarly, I think in early Reforged days where we had a lot more in-person collaborative dynamics as part of our programs, we had this application process. And we learned over time that there were different behaviors and mindsets of like coming or desires for what somebody wanted out of a program that actually created one of those compelling, like created those peer to peer

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compelling experiences, right? And so sometimes people wanted to come into the program and all they wanted to do was like network with peers, right? And they actually didn't want to engage with the content at all. And then sometimes we had the opposite. And they just kind of wanted to be on like their own little solo journey and not engage in stuff. And so over time, we iterated on that and we started to learn like what are the right questions to ask in order to create this better down funnel experience. Now over time, we've evolved the programs as COVID hit and we got rid of the in-person component and all of these other changes that rendered those lessons not relevant in today's environment. But those are like two quick examples that I can think of off the top of my head. We're now in a place where we've started layering on marketplaces to Reforge. And and so this system level thinking is coming up more and more daily because as you know, every conversation we have about demand that we end up talking about supply and every conversation

we end up talking about supply, we end up talking about demand because that's just how it works. Good old marketplaces. I think just that lesson alone is really powerful is just how much the people you bring in impact every other metric and how everything looks like a story often here is just paid users or just innately everything's going to be worse. Basically, retention is going to be worse. People that you're driving through like Facebook and Google ads and you just cut that off and like, wow, retention went up. Wow, look at us go. Yeah. I mean, I think we both mentioned it in here, but we have this concept in Reforge that we teach around good friction. And I think that I think a lot of people are taught to always reduce, reduce, reduce friction. But actually oftentimes, the right thing to do is to add the right amount of friction to you know, create those experiences and those right engagement metrics down funnel is just, it's all the incentives internally are not aligned to doing that because almost every time you add good friction in a product in the very short window, it's like conversion will go down and stuff and you have to wait for those down funnel things to propagate. But people love quick wins, right? People love looking at those short term metric boosts and are often rewarded and applauded for it. And so I think those types of things are actually hard to implement and even advocate for inside of organizations and products. And I think that's why you tend to see these things get chipped away at over time. I think an example of that is how you actually at Reforge, I noticed you turn away a lot of people. There's tons of applications and you've just learned here's who is going to have a good time and we will reject anyone that even though they're so excited by joining Reforge, they're going to have so many people are going to join, they're going to make all this money, but you just know they're going to have bad time, they're going to have bad reviews, it's going to create bad word of mouth. And so I think to me that's a really good example of that in action. Yep. Okay, lesson five, if I can summarize is basically that growth is a system between acquisition, retention, modernization, and basically changing one impacts others. So think about if you see one thing happening here, is there another part of the system that you may want to work on? Bingo, nailed it. All right, lesson number six. Lesson six. Oh, I like this one, do the opposite. So I think a story from very early Reforge days. So when we started Reforge, the norm in the education space like online, that thing that everybody was talking about at the time was essentially these short form, self-serve, low priced, available for everybody courses. And that was like, that was the thing, you know, I don't know if you remember the term MOOCs are massively online courses, right? That was like, that was the rage. It was like,

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ah, this thing is going to like revolutionize our world, right? And there was just so many people going after that. And so when Andrew and I did the first growth series, we essentially did all the opposite of that. We didn't let everybody in. It was for a small group of people. It wasn't purely online. We did some stuff in person. We priced it super high. It wasn't purely self-serve. We had like these live components. We essentially did the exact opposite of what's out there. And so I think for, you know, if anybody was looking at the time, it was just very counter-intuitive. It was like, who's going to like really actually be interested in this? But of course, like the first one that we did, it just like we had an amazing response on the first one. And then, you know, the rest is history with Reforge and then cohort-based courses became a thing and in all of this. But I think the real lesson in here is that if you want to gain traction around something, you often should be looking at what everybody is doing and then try it. And the purpose of looking at what everybody is doing is not to necessarily understand those best practices so that you can repeat them. Your goal is to understand them so you can ask the question, well, what is the opposite? Because in every kind of major trend that everybody's pointed to, there's almost always

an opportunity on the other side, on the 180. A couple other places this applies is that, you know, like if you're trying to figure out a new ad channel as an example, a new paid acquisition channel, one of the best things that you can do is you can look at what all the other advertisers who are advertising to your audience are doing, like look at their creative, all that kind of stuff, and then basically figure out how to do something completely opposite, completely different. And that's how you probably will stand out. That's how you will get the CTRs. That's how you will get the performance. But most things have these gravitational forces where everything converges, right? There

used to be this meme where like every SaaS product had the same exact like character design that like

Slack had. And I can't remember, like, I think maybe Intercom had it. Like, anyways, like that was like the thing. And so you can like visually see this. But this dynamic, I think, actually takes place everywhere, whether it's in a strategy within the category, a design of a product, ad creative within a channel, a specific growth tactic as part of it. A third quick example is that about 10 years ago, when I probably really started to write a bit more on my blog is that the playbook at the time that was really developed by HubSpot was that you would do a lot of high volume short content. At one point, the blog, the HubSpot team was, I think, pumping out like 10 articles a day. It was something crazy, right? And that worked at the time because they were like early in the game, they had the domain authority to rank for each one of those. And a lot of people followed that playbook. But then I and a few others in the space started writing really low volume, very long content. And I think as a result, it stood out and it performed much better among the noise. And most of my email subscribers probably came from all of those early things because it did stand out. And this is a constant game because, of course, as you figure something out and you do the opposite of some piece, some other people are going to start to copy you, and then you got to take a step back and be like, well, what is everybody doing?

And how do I flip the pendulum back to the other perspective? But the major lesson here is like, if you're trying to get traction in something, whether a new product, a new growth tactic, a new channel, the goal of learning what everybody else is doing is not so you can mimic them.

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It's actually to figure out how you can do the opposite of it. That's the ultimate goal of that of that behavior. I love this one. I feel like you need to write a book, Brian. I feel like there's so much depth to each of these lessons that we don't have time to cover. This makes me think about I'm reading Rick Rubin's book right now, the creative act, I think it's called. And he has a similar concept of just like experiment as you're making things and just try the opposite, just like instead of where there's quiet at noise when something is blue, I don't know, make it yellow. Totally. You could see this now too with all the AI stuff is like you see a new gravity, everybody's kind of trending towards a similar set of things. And I think the real winners are going to be the ones who kind of look at that and be like, actually, we're going to set that up as a guardrail of what we're not going to do. I actually thought there was an interesting, I did a LinkedIn post about this because I saw LinkedIn doing this. The playbook right now with AI is, I'm going to use AI to generate a ton of content for content marketing, the rank and Google and all that kind of stuff. I thought it was actually interesting. LinkedIn has this new feature where they're actually not using AI to generate the content. They're using it to lower the friction to more UGC driven content, which ends up being a more unique and like ranking more highly. So they actually looked at that and said, we could probably generate a ton of content using AI and just use our domain authority to rank for these things. But they're like, oh, actually, we're going to use AI to try to figure out how to extract more of the opposite of what everybody else is doing, which is actually human generated content. So I thought that was like another interesting recent example of somebody I've seen doing something very clearly distinctly opposite of what everybody else is doing. What's interesting here is it's not like you need to do the opposite. It's not like the opposite will work. It's that this is just like an interesting area to find new opportunity. 100%. Yeah. And it makes me think about podcasts a little bit. There's always this feeling like people don't have any attention span. They want short things, TikTok clips, all these things. And then there's like Lex Friedman who talks for seven hours of biology. That's like the number one business, number one technology podcast in the world. Yeah. I'm not hooked on Lex, but I'm hooked on acquired, which is like three to four hours. That was the other one. I was exactly, I was just going to say acquired is like they release an episode like once a month. It's very long. They don't have any guests. That's the opposite of what usually the advice is, have guests, get each other's podcasts, release off like all these things. And they're like the third top. Yeah, we're kind of experimenting with something similar. We just released a podcast called Unsolicited Feedback. We kind of looked at it and we were like, there's already a ton of great interview podcasts like yours. We could do another one, but how is that going to work? Like how is that going to stand out? How can we do different? So we try to figure out, we explored areas that would be the opposite. And so the format of the podcast is totally different. We do bring on a guest, but we don't interview them. We actually bring in like two or three product or feature releases from the past couple of weeks that have been out there. And then we kind of pretend that we are like the VP of product at that company. And we just like analyze it and break it down and talk about what we like, what we don't like off the time. We give Unsolicited Feedback on it. And I don't know if it's going to work yet. It's gotten some good traction so far. It has been a lot of fun to create. But it's just like another example of trying to find the white space. Amazing. How do people find that podcast? That's awesome. Let's make sure people know how to find it. Yeah. If you just Google Unsolicited Feedback

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podcast, it'll come up. You can also go to [reforge.com slash podcast slash Unsolicited Feedback](https://reforge.com/podcast/unsolicited-feedback) as well. You can find it on our website, but we're on Apple's Spotify, all the main pieces.

But yeah, we've had some spicy episodes so far. So hope you all enjoy them.

What's a good one for people to start with if they want to dive in?

Well, we just recently, we just released today one with Alayna Verna breaking down Airtable's surprising shift from PLG to Enterprise. So there's definitely some hot takes on that one.

So that's the most recent one. That's a fun one. But we've covered

Zoom's product strategy. We've slacked most recent announcement, a few others.

People should go check out that episode with Christopher Lockhead. Basically, his pitch is that the most legendary companies always create their own category.

Some people agree with that. Some people don't.

I'm on the disagree side of it. But that being said, that's what HubSpot did, which is, you know, they created, they did create a category around inbound.

And the way that you get traction around those things is you define the opposite and you play off of it, right? So their whole messaging was, hey, everybody's doing outbound marketing. Here's the problem. There's a better way. It's called inbound marketing. And then they set themselves up for that. But you have to do that in category creation because you have to start with the thing that people understand and then pivot off of it to teach them what the new thing is.

And that was something that HubSpot did amazingly well. But even Darmesh, the founder, talks a lot about category creation. He's like, look, even though we did it, it's

rarely the right answer to go do it. So I probably shift on the other end of the spectrum,

which is, I'm not sure. I think it can create a lot of value, but I'm not sure I agree with the ultimate premise. Yeah, there's many, many camps we're going to have. We're going to dig deeper into that topic on the podcast coming up. This episode is brought to you by Wix Studio.

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Find out more at [wix.com slash studio](https://wix.com/studio). All right, lesson seven.

Lesson seven is a use case is not personas. So the trope, I think, is always to talk to your customers, know your customers, and it just puts a lot of emphasis on understanding the person or category of person, and then this typically results in creating some type of persona definition and segmentation that the team orients around. But I actually think most of the meat that is actionable, that helps you define not only what to build from a product perspective,

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but how your growth motion and growth model should work is actually defined in the use case that you're going after and the different uses of your product. Some people kind of relate this to jobs to be done. We think about it a little bit differently internally in Reforge, which is a use case is simply a combination and starts with what is the problem that you are trying to solve? What is the value prop that you're trying to create against that problem? What's the alternative for the user? And then most importantly, why are they choosing you over the alternative that often goes mixed? Those components, once you define them, what they extend into are the things that

actually start to help you on the growth side of the equation, which is once I understand what the problem is, I can start to ask questions, well, what is the natural frequency of somebody encountering that problem? That starts to define your retention metrics, which then starts to define your activation metrics and it kind of works all the way downstream. You can also ask the question, well, what is the natural frequency of adoption of a solution around this problem? A lot of people don't think about that, right? Especially in SaaS tools, which is for most SaaS products, your persona, your target customer, it's actually only in market for that once every few-ish years or so. And as a result, what most people end up focusing on is just trying to capture that small sliver of those that are in market. And they don't think about, well, how do I capture the attention and build a relationship with folks that aren't in market yet, but are going to be eventually? And that was HubSpot's biggest thing with when they developed the whole inbound marketing playbook and content marketing is that most people thought of HubSpot, they just thought of them as a blog. They didn't even know that there was a SaaS tool. If you asked our audience, but what that created was the moment they were in market for that tool, where was the first place that they were going to go? They were going to go to HubSpot and they were like, oh, I've already have a relationship with this brand. And that ended up reducing quite a bit of friction. The reality is that most products today are actually adopted by multiple personas. And that leads to trying to solve for multiple use cases, multiple problems across these personas. And I think that is the way more detrimental thing than narrowing in on a single use case that might be adopted by multiple personas. So it's kind of like flipping it on its head. So that's how we define everything in Reforges essentially. What are the different use cases? What are the different use cases that we're trying to build against? And then we might go ask the question, who has those problems? Who has those use cases? And most of the time, we've actually been surprised that there are people in the market that have those problems and that have those use cases that we would not have identified through any sort of persona research, but we can make those people successful. We can capture those people as part of the process. So the framework you use for this use case just to summarize, which is really interesting, I imagine it's kind of like this one pager template you use, where you here's the problem, here's the value prop that would convince someone to try this thing. Here's the alternatives to what we have. And here's why they would choose us over the alternatives. Yeah, we call it the use case map. And this was actually developed originally in our retention program with Casey Winters and Sean Klaus. But it's essentially what you describe. It's essentially a set of rows and there's a specific order. I might get the order slightly wrong right now written off and alive, but it starts with you define the problem. You then have a simple statement of who might have this problem. You then say, well, what are

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their alternatives to solve this problem? That leads into the why. Why are they going to choose you over the alternative? It's kind of calling out differentiation, essentially. And then it flows into, okay, well, what is the natural frequency of this problem, which flows into all of your retention and activation metrics? You can also ask what is the natural frequency of adoption, which starts to help you understand more around your acquisition metrics, what percentage, how many people might be in market for this in the given year, and what we might need to do to actually like sequence and like capture all of that value. So that's kind of like how that whole thing flows. And then some people start to layer on and solve multiple use cases over time. But the biggest thing that we find in reforge, when we have people go through this exercise, which is the next thing we'll talk about, is that they end up mapping out like eight different use cases. And we're like, whoa, that's like, that's way too much. You're obviously trying to solve for too much here. Before we get to the next lesson, just to keep plugging awesome reforge stuff, is there an artifact or a course for people to go check out on that specific thread? I think there will be an artifact on this soon. If there isn't live today, we can get one live. But this actually is so fundamental. It's in almost all of our growth courses now. But the one we go deepest on this is our retention engagement program. Awesome. Okay. So lesson number seven, use cases, not personas. Correct. Awesome. What is lesson number eight, Brian Balfour. Okay. If there is like one line that I probably repeat the most in a reforge course, it's this one, which is solving for everyone is solving for no one. I think this extends to everything in life. And I have a couple of interesting examples from this. So let me let me start with like the product in the marketing one, because I think that's the one that, of course, I think everybody might be nodding is like, of course, of course, we can't solve for everybody, right? But that's that's honestly where a lot of product and growth mistakes, I think come from. It's not about being specific about who you're solving for. It's about being specific about who you aren't solving for. I've found like that is the thing that ends up being the one that helps being the better guardrail for for a team. Because for some reason, when all you do is define who you are solving for or what you're solving for going back to the use case thing, a lot of people start to like justify or rationalize like a bunch of adjacent use cases or a bunch of adjacent people. And it's kind of like, well, yeah, it's like 50% what we're solving were 50% not. And so you have to you have to like define you have to draw on the lines around it, right? And so there's an actual HBS case study done on this from early HubSpot, which is early HubSpot, they kind of built this marketing tool. They sold it to a bunch of people, they were having retention problems. They went in, did all of this research. And what they found was like, actually, they had ended up selling into four use cases that on the surface feel very similar, but actually in reality are very different. And the four use cases was they had this mid market, they call a marketing merry, a VP of marketing, who was like looking for a solution in like an all in one marketing solution because she didn't want to aggregate a bunch of point solutions. They have then had this like enterprise, I think it was like called enterprise ID or something like that, enterprise who was looking for a more like compliant marketing solutions, secure, like all of these types of things. Still solving marketing, still trying to solve inbound marketing on the surface seem the same. But when you when you got down into it was kind of different. You also had like this very small business owner that looked like the SMB customer. But there's a very big difference between an owner of a 20 person company using your product, and that business actually having

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a head of marketing using the product and their needs and were ended up being very different beneath the surface. And then they had this like technical marketer who wanted to get in there and customize and all that kind of stuff. So they ended up focusing on that mid marketing, marketing, merry persona and use case around all in one. But the bigger thing that they did was they said, we are not going to serve these three use cases. And going back to what we talked about, they aligned this was before my time, they aligned all the sales comp behind it, they aligned the success, they aligned all of the marketing around it. And whenever these folks came up in the funnel and kind of indicated that they were in one of these use cases, it was like, ah, you know, HubSpot is not is not for that. But I think this is where most teams get stretched and where most debate comes from is that if you haven't clearly defined who you are not solving for, you can almost always make a case for how this person or this use case fits the thing that you have defined. Now, the thing that I've realized is that this actually extends into a bunch of other places, hiring culture being one of the biggest ones. And I've seen so many super generic culture statements, and they end up being generic because they are trying to accommodate for everybody. And so they just get watered down, watered down, watered down. But culture is really about being super opinionated and actually acknowledging this is not a place for everybody. And you've got to encode those values that actually say this is a place for who as well as for who it's not. And so this is an artifact that we have live, you can see you can see ours. And so half of our values are defining the value, but actually half of the values doc is saying, what does this not mean? What are anti-patterns to these values? Because those are the things that actually help us understand more of who is a right fit for the type of company that we are trying to build and who is not right for those things. And those things get implemented in hiring and in all these other places. The last piece is, I've noticed this actually extends to almost all life as well. I'll give a really strange example. This is something that I've brought up before, but now a lot of people know about me is that before my life in tech, I was actually a wedding planner for a few summers in LA. My uncle is a wedding planner down in LA, and I went and worked with them for a few summers. And it was actually a phenomenal experience. I got exposed to so many things I probably wouldn't have been exposed to otherwise. But one of the things that I learned in that, reflecting on that experience, is that the most miserable couples in the wedding planning process were the ones that we're trying to solve for everybody. They're fiance, both sets of parents, the friends, that annoying uncle Eddie that you might have. And that's where all the stress of the process came from. And the people who tried to accommodate all of those things are the ones that didn't have their best experience for that, what's supposed to be an amazing and magical day. And instead, I think in that process, my uncle would try to get them to essentially say, who's the most important group here? Is it your family? Is it your parents? Is that who you're trying? That's okay if it is. There's nothing wrong with that, but let's focus on that. Or is it your friends? Or is this really an experience for you two? Because what you design and build around the experience that you build around for a wedding really determines. And then when all of these edged things came up, you could ask the question, is this really for you? Or is this for this group of people or set of people that you've distinctly said, we know they're going to have a say, but we're specifically not designing this experience for them.

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So anyways, I think this happens also in relationships too and work-life balance where people are trying to solve for all the things, friends, the career, the kid, the family, the spouse, the hobbies, like all the things. And at the end of the day, everything's a trade-off in work and in life and not acknowledging those trade-offs and not actually specifically saying what you're not solving for. I think that's where a lot of my stress and anxiety has probably come from. This one really hits home. My wife often tells me that I'm trying to make too many people happy at once. And I have this people-pleasing tendency and she's like, you're not going to make everyone happy and just don't cause all these problems by making sure everyone's doing great. Well, what have you done with this? Have you gotten better at identifying the groups to be like, you know what? I'm making this trade-off and that's okay. Mostly I'm like, no, I'm not. Leave me alone. I don't have this problem. But no, there's definitely some of that. So it's just realizing that that's something that I try to do and I'm like, okay, I don't need everyone to be happy. It's going to be okay. That's right. But that's 100%. That random uncle Eddie, he will be okay if you don't give him what he wants and say it's okay. On the values piece, I thought I just wanted to double click on that because I think it's really important. Something that I learned also from this guy, Douglas Atkin, who I worked with at Airbnb that helped us define our values at Airbnb. And he said exactly the same thing. It's really important to make it clear who's not a fit. Not being mean or just like exclusionary, but just like, if this doesn't feel right to you, you shouldn't work here. This is what we believe. And so like a lot of values are just like integrity, trust, like things that are true for everyone. And so if those are your values, that's not of any value really, because everyone's like, every place has that. I think this also comes down to I think a common topic that you probably get asked about too. Even in all your series about how we do products, you just did one on linear and there was actually quite a bit of Twitter response to it, which was like, this only works in this methodology. But there's actually multiple ways to do product, product management at Airbnb. It was much more designer, from what I understand, much more designer forward. And in some organizations, it's actually much more engineering led and engineering forward. And in other cases, it's much more product manager for it. And there's different types of people, different shapes of people that help you create that environment and are successful and happy in that environment. But it's when you actually haven't acknowledged and defined those things, is like when you bring the people who don't fit on the team, and then they're trying to pull the team in a different direction, and that creates a ton of friction. It creates just a ton of friction internally. And those are just frustrating conversations. Yeah, that is absolutely true. I think with the linear post, which we're looking to just if folks haven't seen that, something I found, so I've done these posts on how many different companies have done product, maybe 10 at this point. And I think one of the takeaways, and I'm planning to do a little, what have I learned across all these companies is exactly what you said. There's so many ways to do it. There's the linear approach. We're not going to hire product managers for as long as we can. It's going to be designers and engineers running the show. And there's basically every other company where they often did hire product managers really early and it worked out great. So I think it really,

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there are many ways to do it. I think a lot of it depends on who your founders are and whether they value them, the people you hire, and how much do they want to do product manager. 100% based on founders. I think the second thing is who your customer and who you're building for, right? The thing in linear's case is that they are building a product for themselves, essentially, right now, right? That product is designed for modern software development teams who are most used by engineers and designers. So it makes sense that they have an intuitive sense of what the customer wants. Whereas if they're building a product for, I don't know, like call it like sales folks, right? The engineers and designers are just are probably not connected to that audience in the same exact way. And as a result, you need a specific type of way of developing product for that specific, that serves that specific customer. But I agree with you. And a lot of it stems from founder, but I think also a lot of it stems from who and what you're building. And I think in that case, it's not like the designer and the engineer couldn't do that well. It's just that is not going to be a fun job. Like if you're a designer, that's spending time talking to salespeople all day and writing research briefs and PRDs. Yeah, I think it's time too, right? Like I think when an engineer and a designer are building for another engineer and designer, they can get to those answers, get to those sense much more quickly, right? But I think it would consume way more time if they're building for a totally different audience, right? That they don't really have a lot of experience or intuitive sense for. And so then at the end of the equation, you have, you're right, it's not just them being unhappy, but they're spending so little time writing code or doing the design that it ends up being a less productive way to get to the ultimate goal, which is building a successful product. Absolutely. The other thing that I think of, because we're going down this thread of linear, because yeah, I was surprised by the reaction a little bit, is that in my notion, deep dive on how Notion builds product, one of the interview answers was just like, we should have hired product managers earlier. They waited a long time for similar reasons. We don't need product managers. And looking back, they're like, ah, that was probably not a good idea. And I think it was a similar situation where designer led building for themselves. So it's, it's more of a question, just like, when does it make sense? There's, I just hate that there's this like anti-product management. It is that has come up. No product managers. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, like everybody's looking for like that, that data point. I mean, that kind of started with, you know, Brian Chesky's words kind of getting taken out of, out of context and, but there is like a anti-PM sort of sentiment at the moment, which is just a fascinating, fascinating thing to watch. So yeah. It's fascinating. We're actually going to have Brian Chesky on the podcast coming up in sometime November is the plan. So we'll talk about that. And like my take there is I just feel like there are many bad product managers that just come in and slow everything down, take over totally. And so, so I think that's where a lot of this comes from. You ended up working with a bad PM that's just like, not doesn't help. My feeling is awesome product managers is make everything better. They help you do the work you want to do, then block you, give you space to do the work you want to do. Like that's often what I find is just like, great PMs make everything better. Bad PMs create the sense of like, oh, get rid of product management. We don't need them. Yeah. All right. Well, we got two more lessons. Our penultimate lesson, Brian Balfour. How do we got? Lesson nine, find sparring partners, not mentors or coaches. As you can imagine kind of

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being in the LND space, I get asked for referrals to mentors and coaches quite a bit. And I've had mentors and coaches in my career. I imagine you have too. But when I really look back and I think about where have I gotten the most value, meaning who has helped me progress the most. It has ended up not being one of those mentors or coaches. It's actually somebody who I would define as a sparring partner. And so I think about this in the boxing analogy. A coach, once again, is sort of giving you direction, yelling at you on the sidelines. But a sparring partner is somebody who's in the ring with you, kind of throwing blows back and forth. And the thing about that sparring partner is they probably share a common set of goals. They're probably also trying to get better at the thing that you're getting better at. They're on a similar level, but maybe have some slightly different strengths to you as part of it. They're not afraid to push and throw punches to help you get better, which I think is often missing sometimes from the mentor or coach relationship. And they're playing the same sport, right? So a PM in the PM or however you want to take this analogy. But the most important thing is they are in the arena with you. When you find those folks that have that set of dynamics of the right shared set of goals, they're not afraid to throw punches with you, all that kind of stuff, they are the ones that I have found have pushed me to a much deeper level than somebody kind of giving me some advice from the outside. Most mentorship programs are extremely forced and not very fluid. You also tend to not share a common worker goal. You can pay mentors or coaches by the hour, right? They're trying to achieve something different in their career than the path that you might be on, even though there's some similarities. And I think oftentimes those discussions just end up being discussions about generalities or how to get promoted or one of those things. Whereas a sparring partner is like, I found that person is helping me create and ship something better in the world, which is ultimately I think the thing that you're going to get judged on. So I've solved this in a few different ways over time. At a certain moment in my career, I had what I think a lot of people would call mastermind groups where I would get people at a similar stage of company as me together, we would meet biweekly or monthly and all those types of things. Those I think work for an interesting period of time, but inevitably, some people evolve in a different direction, and so the group becomes less and less relevant over time to you. And so you basically almost always have to hit a reset button to blow their groove up and reassemble it. And that can be a decent amount of work. Oftentimes, these end up being co-founders relationships and starting a company. There's a lot of times your co-founders are a sparring partner for you. Most recently, though, I've been, for the past about seven years, been organizing this yearly trip called Recatalyze to Mexico, which is like this group of founders. We do it in December towards the end of the year where we're kind of reflecting on the year. And we go spend five days in Mexico, not only getting to know each other, but inspiring each other with what all of us have been thinking about and accomplishing for the rest of the year. But most importantly is we have these dinner combos that just get super brutally honest and deep with each other. And there's tears, there's laughing, there's yelling, there's all of these types of things. It's probably the most productive few days out of my entire year at this point. And so I think there's actually a lot of ways to solve this. But what I often find is that when somebody is like looking, when they come to

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me looking for a mentor or a coach, they are actually better served by figuring out how to surround themselves with somebody that looks more like a sparring partner. Those folks tend to just be the bonds and the relationships that really push you for many years throughout your career versus some of these other folks. This group sounds like your own version of the best.

It is kind of, there are some eccentric personalities in that group for sure.

Are there any folks that you want to name as examples of some of your best sparring partners or are they better kept anonymous? Yeah, there's a few folks. Two of my former co-founders from a previous company, Aaron White, who's now the CTO of Vendor and then Ariel Diaz. I think those two are both like the blend of, well, they think so differently than I do that every time I get together with them, I'm kind of energized because they have just completely different perspectives or they've been playing around with different things. But on the flip side of that too is they've also given me some of the hardest hitting feedback in my career. Maybe not even intentionally, but they know me so well that they know how to get straight to the heart of it. Whereas a coach often is kind of poking around the surfaces trying to get to know you and that takes an incredibly long time. Whereas I think folks like Ariel and Aaron are like, they just provide a one-liner perspective to me where it's just like, oh, God, I hate that you're right.

It's like that type of reaction. Usually when people say something and you're angry, it's because there's a sense of truth in it. And the question is, well, what is that truth?

But getting those statements, getting that feedback is just so hard because everybody wants to please everybody. So that's kind of it. So I think those two and those two have been doing that trip with me for the longest, whereas other folks have, we get new blood in there every year or two. Is there an example of hard hitting feedback that you can share? And second to your question, is there a way you set up those relationships where people know they can be really honest with you? Do you just tell them, please be brutally honest with me or you do it in return? I'm going to keep the examples to myself because we do have, what is it like,

Chatham House Rules or whatever for that trip, which is like, we just don't talk about what we talk about there. I will say though, if you're going to do something like this, the key is all about setting the tone. So we do have new folks in there and we do set an expectation of like, here are some of the types of things that we're going to cover and stuff. But that first dinner combo, it's like always myself or a few people who have been there before who are the first ones to open up the conversation or answer the dinner question that we might have.

And they just like really set the tone for like, how open and how deep and how hard hitting we're going to get. And usually you do two or three of those, people follow suit.

And it opens up everybody else for the rest of the time you have, whether it's a meeting or an experience like we're talking about. So some folks on that trip have talked about, they open up with like potential divorces or shutting a company. It's like things that you're definitely not going to get in a, hello, nice to meet you type of conversation. It's straight to the point. It's like, hey, nice to meet you. Let me tell you about this thing that's going disastrous in my life. And then the other person just tends to reciprocate. And that opens up the whole, that just opens up the whole shebang. It opens people up and everything kind of flows from there. Sounds like an amazing group. Brian, I don't want this podcast end, but we're on our very final lesson. Let me summarize lesson nine real quick. Find sparring partners, not mentors or coaches. What is a lesson number 10? Number 10 we chose

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because

I felt like it was barely relevant for the times. So I think where we're at in the ecosystem of things right now, especially among a lot of startups is that people are in this process of seeing that, look, they had some things that were kind of working, but not working fully. And as a result, they have to layer on some new bets. They have to figure out some new things. And this also goes for even fast-growing companies as well. And the principle of the lesson is, essentially, you need to give 2x plus the activation energy for things that need to change. The mistake is a lot of times people lean into new things. They kind of dabble and dabble. They dip their toes in it and they take it super, super incrementally along the way. But let's say you have an existing business or an existing growth channel or something else and you're trying to layer on something new

or make a change. Well, that existing business, that existing growth channel probably has some baseline growth rate. Call it 50% year over year. It could be anything. Well, for that new thing to actually make a meaningful impact and help you drive the whole thing forward, it has to be growing

at a multiple of 50% year over year in order for it to catch up and actually start to show up in the numbers, start to show up for customers, and all of those things. So an easy example of this is, I've seen a lot of businesses where it's been primarily driven by paid marketing. And they have a lot of fast growth. And at some point, of course, they're like, ah, we've got to diversify away from this. It's too risky, cacks are rising, like all the typical things that we talk about and problems with paid marketing. And so maybe they try to diversify away and their next bet is on SEO. Well, you have to inject it with enough activation energy for that SEO to be growing at a multiple of whatever rate you're growing at paid acquisition for it to grow up and make a meaningful impact and actually achieve your ultimate goal, which is diversify away from this channel. Now, the hard part about this is kind of going back to our earlier one, which is like, you don't pile all of this activation energy on at once, because that tends to just be too much money, too many people, too many voices in the equation around new things. And instead, like you, what I always say is like, you can you can flow through the steps faster when you have like an existing baseline or an existing business to grow off of, but you can't skip steps on new things. So you still have to start with that small team getting fit on that new thing, but you have to be very quick to support and continue to provide that activation energy and not be incredibly incremental as you like step into and lean into that lean into that thing. But the net result of this is like, I think a lot of folks think these new bets are going to come and save them in a much shorter time period than they actually take some to play out because of this dynamic of like, hey, you have this inertia of an existing machine. Well, guess what? Like if you want the new thing to take an effect, like its slope on its line has to be a much steeper slope than whatever your baseline thing is. And I think that's just something that people tend to overlook and in something I've overlooked historically as well. An example of this that comes to mind is when Airbnb was working on trips. It was this whole new bet of just like, we're going to allow you to do experiences in addition to find a home. And Brian basically focused on that full time for a while for like a year. That's the thing he was focused on. We're going to make this thing work. And I'm going to PM this thing and make it work and make it awesome. And when they launched, the easy thing to do would have been like,

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he comes to Airbnb.com, what it is mostly with like, hey, now we have trips. What he did instead is like the homepage became trips, plus you could book a home. And it felt crazy because everyone's coming there to book a home. That's the entire business. But his bet was like, people know that they know they can book a home. They'll find it even though it became much harder to like search

for homes. He's like, they'll figure it out. But we need to can we need to people to understand we do this also now. And the best way to do that is just like, bam, this is Airbnb welcome, you can book experiences, you can also book a home. Yeah, this is especially prevalent when you're going from single to multi product or you're going through like a messaging and positioning change, right? Because you've probably invested in one type of message or trying to tell people what you do for years, probably, right? And just because you launch it new, right, it doesn't, it's still going to take years, right, for people to learn what you are at the new thing. And so I was catching up with one of the founders of HubSpot a while back, right? And many years later, even though they have seven different products now in their product suite, a lot of them still refer to them as like a marketing automation email marketing company. And what they're really trying to get people to think about them as is a platform company starting with your CRM. But in that CRM's, I don't know, seven years old, six years old now, right? But there was eight years of investment in getting people to know them as a marketing company before that, right? And so just overcoming that inertia is, yeah, you've got to do things like what Brian did with the Trips product to really get it to start to take hold.

Yeah, that's always the fear people have when they're starting to start with a wedge and just like, we're going to win this one thing and then expand and just like, oh, but maybe people only think of us for that such a fine line. I feel like HubSpot also is just a story I want to dig into more. It feels like there's so much to learn from their journey. Yeah, I learned a ton even from my brief time there. But yeah, that company has been through, has executed so well over a long period of time. It's just like, yeah, so many lessons there that I took away and I'm sure exist that I don't have knowledge of now because I haven't been there in some time. Brian, we got there all 10 lessons. Is there anything else you wanted to touch on or share before we get to our very exciting lightning round? I think as we mentioned, we love folks to, you know, we have artifacts on Reforge, things that I've actually created that like our values, like our original business hypothesis doc and stuff that you can go to Reforge around on this. And so if you want to dig deeper into them, sign for that. It's free. And would love for folks to check that out. With that, we've reached our very exciting lightning round. Brian, what are two or three books that you've recommended most to other people? After having two kids, I get barely any time to read a read a full book. So my answer to this is going to be my answer to this is going to be super old and historic. I will say that there are these books that feel magical when you get them. I remember when I read Ray Dahlen's PDF before he even became out of the book, I almost felt like I was like falling into a secret about principles. I thought it was just like a very interesting structured way of thinking. I don't agree with all of it in there, but there's I think a lot that I've taken away from that. Of course, like Peter Teal zero to one book had that impression on me the first time. These are all, I think, like old, like old recommendations. But I think the ones that get to the root and like incredible like first principles, thinking and trying to pack an entire life's worth of lessons

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into a couple hundred pages versus draw one lesson out over a couple hundred pages, those are the books that I've walked away with the most. Next question. What is a favorite recent movie or TV show? My favorite movies for some weird reason are all the movies around like the great financial crisis. So why? I have no idea, but I love not even the great financial crisis, but Wolf of Wall Street. There's one from the bank's perspective. Big short. Thank you. Big short. Yeah. I don't know why, but I just, you know, I think part of the reason is a lot of those movies are about what we were talking about early is like a small set of people who did the opposite. They took counterintuitive bets. For some reason, I just like that really appeals to me. In terms of TV shows, there's a couple of TV shows that I feel like capture the pain of creating something so well that no other, I have just not found in others, The Bear. Episode seven of season two is I think probably one of the best episodes of television period that I've watched that episode specifically multiple times. Is that the one where they're having dinner? No, it's where he goes and works at Elinia. And he goes through this transformation and you can just, you see both the pain and the cousin. Yeah. Oh, God, it's so good. The other one is Halt and Catch Fire if you want something specific to the tech ecosystem, especially the early seasons, I think capture the pain of creating something new like really well. Next question. What is that favorite interview question you like to ask candidates? You finally. I actually don't like, as we talked earlier, I don't like questions. I just like looking at the work. But when I look at the work, the questions I'm asking are typically breaking down how they thought through the work. What are the steps that they went through? What questions did they ask? How did they approach it? Because then I get a sense of how they might approach a similar problem internally at the org. And that's the thing I'm trying to gain conviction around is that if we give this person similar shaped problems that they've got the approach and process to potentially solve it. I'm not looking for them to have the answer to our problems in the interview. I just want to be confident that they have an approach to find the solution. Is there a favorite product that you recently discovered they really like, either an app or a physical thing, something about at a store? I am not a things person. I don't like buying a lot of things. But I joke around with Adam Fishman is that I basically only buy Viori clothes at this point. They're just too comfortable work from home. I'm wearing some right now. I literally shorts, underwear, t-shirt, and this shirt. All Viori and they just came out with jackets. And so that's covered as well. Now I just need them to make running shoes or something. Yeah, do they do underwear? I think so. Yeah, I'm pretty sure. Or they do like boxer. They also have the shorts with the liner in them. That's the ultimate life hack. You just reduce one piece of clothing. Yeah. Amazing. Yeah, I'm wearing Viori pants right now. It's my favorite podcasting pants. What's a favorite life motto that you like to repeat either to yourself, that you share with friends? I don't have my place decked out like yours yet, Lenny. I need to do that. But I have multiple of these of like the man in the arena speech. I do think that is the thing that I keep coming back to and the thing that I keep finding the value that I resonate with the most. It's even what we try to build reforge around is like we're trying to build reforge around the people that we create programs and stuff. These are the folks that have been in the arena. They've gotten the blood, sweat, and tears to talk about. I just highly respect people who enter that arena and do that hard work. And those are the folks that I've learned the most from

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and want to spend my precious hours building for and spending time with.

I think exactly the same way with this podcast. I try really hard to stick to people that have done the thing. And when Casey Winters came on the podcast after he's just like, Lenny, make sure you stay close to people really doing the work and not just quantifiers.

What is the most valuable lesson that your mom or dad taught you?

Both my parents were teachers. And so I think probably they did not understand my entrepreneurial life at all early on. I got that elsewhere. But I do think the things that I took from my parents were just a lot of lessons around how to learn and that you can learn anything if you actually want to learn it. And I think that's probably the most valuable thing that they taught me was just how to learn. And that's something I want to pass down to my kids as well. Amazing. You mentioned Adam Fishman for our final question. You were on his podcast, Tech Dads. I think it's called Startup Dads. Yeah, Startup Dads. Startup Dads. Startup Dads. So we're willing to it. And something you shared that has really stuck with me as a dad now is one of your biggest lessons as a dad is that your job as a parent is to bring your kids from being fully dependent to fully independent. Could you just share that lesson for folks?

Because I thought it was really powerful. Yeah, it's like a spectrum. So consider your kid at age zero on one end of the spectrum and age 18 on the other end of the spectrum. And I think your job as a parent is to move them along this spectrum where at age zero, obviously, they're fully dependent. You are making all the decisions for them. And by 18, what you want to do is that they are making all the decisions for themselves. And what that requires is, I think, a gradual process of helping them make bigger and bigger decisions over their lifespan. And you just end up being put into those decisions. That even starts at like an early age where my kids are still young. They're four and one and a half. But the example I give is like, I start to see a kid, one of my kids, playing with some toy that he loves really rough. And I know he's going to break it. And I can do one of two things. I can either go and intervene and stop and take the toy away, or I can get him to pause and get him to think about what might happen if he keeps playing with the toy like that and then let him do his thing. If he decides to break it, he decides to break it. And he learns that lesson. But that framework has just really resonated with me, because I think as we all do, we probably have people in our lives that have a very hard time kind of thinking for themselves and making those decisions. And so that's kind of what my view is. By the time I'm 18, I don't want to be deciding the college that my kids go to. I want to help create the environment where I'm helping them get the information they need to make those types of decisions and make decisions for themselves, because I think ultimately that's what will hopefully set them up for a successful life. Amazing. Brian, this was everything I hope it would be. I am so thankful they made time for this. Two final questions. Where can folks find you a line if they want to reach out? And how can listeners be useful to you? Yeah, you can find me in a few places. My website, brianbelford.com, I write incredibly sporadically, so don't expect that regular. Very high. Very high. Other than that, just check out reforge.com, Artifacts, I'm pretty active within that product as well. And then Unsolicited Feedback podcast, join me and Fareed Massavot on a weekly basis where we give unsolicited feedback to all sorts of products. It's a really fun environment. And other than that, how they can be helpful for me is just for folks that are in the space that want to be part of a development community, join [reforge](http://reforge.com), and listen to the podcast. That's it. Amazing. Now, we have 10 more episodes we can do

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to go through the rest of the lessons that you've collected over your life. V1 is done. Brian, thank you so much for being here. This was amazing. Thanks for having me. Bye, everyone. Thank you so much for listening. If you found this valuable, you can subscribe to the show on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your favorite podcast app. Also, please consider giving us a rating or leaving a review, as that really helps other listeners find the podcast. You can find all past episodes or learn more about the show at lennyspodcast.com. See you in the next episode.