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Team Building

A simple truth: PTO alone isn't enough to combat burnout, and there's no one-size-fits-all way to keep a team happy and healthy. In search of solutions, we asked four designers how they built a company culture that prioritizes wellness.

AS TOLD TO KAITLIN PETERSEN

date *Spring 2023*



THE SMALL STUFF

For **Tracy Morris**, building a team means treating her employees the way she wants to be treated in the workplace. That means taking a flexible approach to working hours—but as the McLean, Virginia–based designer describes, it's also about paying attention to the details and making sure everyone feels acknowledged for a job well done.

You have a refreshing approach to valuing your team and their time. What inspired your thinking there?

I know that a lot of employers have been burned, but I think making things comfortable and accommodating for your staff is very different than being taken advantage of. We have a 15-day leave policy—that includes sick leave, vacation and personal time. In addition, I give the team two weeks off at Christmas, a week off at Thanksgiving, and four to five days around the Fourth of July. I also believe that exercise is so important for your mindset and your health, so team members can leave early to go to a spin or yoga class. If you've got a class with an instructor who you adore but it's hard to get there because it starts at 5:15 p.m.—OK, leave at 4:30 p.m. and let me know that you'll make up your time. I think that's imperative.

I also don't believe in people sitting in traffic. It's such a terrible waste of time, and it drives me crazy. Where we are, the difference between local roads and toll roads can be up to an hour, but it can also be expensive—as much as \$50 one way. One of my colleagues lives down I-95, which is a north-south road in D.C. that is just a bear. She kept saying, "Oh, my gosh, the traffic." I asked her, "Why aren't you taking the hot lanes?" And she said, "Well, it can be pretty expensive." And I was thinking to myself, "I can either have you here billing your hourly rate for the company or I can have you stuck in traffic and miserable. This is a no-brainer." So now I pay for the team's EZ Passes. They look at Google Maps and if the traffic is terrible, they take the toll road home.

That's a really big expense.

It can be, but at the same time, they respect me enough to not abuse it.

How do you create that kind of culture? Because some of this stuff only works if you've got a team of people who do have that respect.

My team knows that I am not going to make them do anything I would not do myself—we've had that respect for one another from day one. I am cleaning toilets, sweeping floors and moving rugs with them. There's no, "get me some coffee" or "drop off my dry cleaning" here. We are a team.

It's easy to say that respect is a core value of your business, but it's much harder to do that in a 360-degree way all the time.

Exactly. I have seen employees treat employers badly, I have seen employers treat employees badly and I've seen clients treat both employees and employers badly. But the second you allow somebody to cross that line, you're done. If somebody is going to be rude and inconsiderate, they will always be rude and inconsiderate, and I won't tolerate it. If somebody is rude to my team, it is nipped in the bud immediately.

What does that conversation look like in practice?

That conversation is, "I understand that maybe this did not go the way you were expecting, but your communication style toward my employee is not tolerated. Thank you very much for your interest in our firm, but I'm going to find you somebody else who's a better fit." Having respect all the way around is imperative to what we're doing—and really, to anything.

Are there any downsides to your approach, whether in cost, effort, time or outcome?

There are always trade-offs. Mine is especially with time. It definitely takes more time with the way I approach things—I know there are plenty of people who would say this is inefficient, but I also think it's a personable and empathetic approach.

It can also be costly. I know I spend more money than most employers, but it's very important to me that the team gets spot bonuses—it's nice to give a couple hundred dollars of additional cash here and there. It doesn't feel so formal, and it makes them feel like, "Oh, wow, this is special."

What about things like health care?

I had a situation previously where I was laid off and then had to use COBRA for my health insurance, and it was a complicated process. So I let my team choose their health plan. They put it under their name because I believe health insurance is very personal, and then I cover whatever it costs. So if it's \$300 a month, I put that times 12 in their paycheck. We also offer a matched 401K because I think it's important to let them know that their future is being considered.

OPPOSITE:

Tracy Morris designed this tone-on-tone whiskey room in rich shades of indigo as a retreat for her clients to unwind and relax.

If a principal wants to start taking a more thoughtful approach to their team's happiness, where would you suggest they start?

Start by celebrating the important things. Make sure you acknowledge each of your employees' birthdays, or if somebody is getting married, or if they've had a death in the family. Just start being a little bit more aware. Today, for example, we celebrated an employee's birthday. I baked her a carrot cake, and she knew I spent half the day Sunday making her that cake. It means a lot to me that my team knows how much they mean to me.

Another small thing you can do to foster connection: On Monday mornings, we go around the office for 10 to 15 minutes and talk about the weekend and team calendar. Where did you go? What was your favorite thing that you did? It opens everybody up and calms people down.

We try to do a team-building event at least once a year. A couple of years ago, we did one of those ropes courses and had dinner afterward. We've also gone apple picking and then out to lunch. It's important to get together, listen to each other and have a little fun every now and again.

With the team I have now, I feel like I have four partners. Everybody has their own job to do, but I know that they all have my back. That's such a great place to be in, because I can't do this by myself anymore. It doesn't work without great people. Sure, there are still days that being the boss is challenging—and when you have the wrong employees, those days feel like years. But when you have the right people, you're in a great place.





THE RIGHT TO RECHARGE

Bay Area designer **Noz Nozawa** despised the corporate culture she encountered early in her career—inflexibility, an always-on-call mentality, or simple indignities like having to ask for permission to go to the doctor. As her team has grown, Nozawa has developed her firm's values around the inalienable right to take a break.

What shaped your approach to PTO at your firm?

I had no idea if I would ever have employees when I set out to build this business, but I knew that I hated the way that I was working when I worked for other people. I believe in work—I think we would all atrophy if we didn't have something that we worked toward—but it's only a part of our lives. I make a lot of mistakes as an employer, but I'm very protective of [my staff's] time off, and I am very proud of that.

In the winter of 2015, I was in the Arctic Circle for the holidays, but I was scrambling to meet a made-up deadline. I had put pressure on myself to respond to an architect because it was the biggest job opportunity I'd had to date, so I was sitting in the hotel lobby trying to do these drawings and feeling like a hostage to my job while my husband was waiting to go snowshoeing together to see the Northern Lights. That's when I was like, "Never again." When I hired my first employee in 2019, I implemented the firm's holiday break. It started as a week and a half and grew to almost three weeks, which frankly was a little too long. This year, we've settled on slightly over two weeks.

By mid-summer 2022, I realized that the team was feeling stressed and morale was lower. I thought about the way we all look

forward to our winter break and how [it feels better] if we have something to gun for, so we started taking a week off around the Fourth of July. If it feels like there's never a good time to take vacation, then the entire team taking off at the same time makes it very easy.

Do you feel the difference when you come back?

Yes. A lot of my team members have been traumatized by previous employers. They took vacations, but they had to keep their phones on. When someone [at my firm has] their first vacation and realizes it's real—that no one is bothering you while you're away, or if you see emails come through, you don't have to respond—they realize that it's actually safe to turn off.

What kind of preparation does that require from you?

One thing I really hated as an employee was that even when you take a vacation, the longer you're gone, the more your emails build up and then the more stress you come back to, and everyone seems to expect you to be fully caught up the day you come back. So one of the things I stress repeatedly is that your first day back in the office after vacation is just for catching up on email. We establish that with the whole team so that there's no resentment.

I also acknowledge that the days before someone leaves for a vacation, or before we take a holiday break, are going to be more intense than usual, in order to make sure we have what we need. It's just a couple of additional meetings explicitly in place to make sure that if I need something while they're away, I can either figure it out myself, or that nothing is so time-sensitive that it can't wait for them to get back.

OPPOSITE:

Raw, textural elements like a sculptural cement bathtub, cedar slats and a plaster wall treatment transform this primary bathroom by Noz Nozawa into a restorative sanctuary.

How have you adjusted for the skill-specific parts of an employee's job?

Honestly, it may mean that things take longer. For example, we have one person on the team who does all of our Revit drawings. She does other things too, but that's one thing where there is only one computer in our company that does that. If we need something when that person is away, I just say, "OK, we'll get it done when they return."

Something similar happened recently. We had a client doing a stunning stair runner, and every stitch of it is custom, custom, custom. It was supposed to be installed in November, then December, and the client was very unhappy about the whole thing. It arrived just as I was preparing to leave for vacation, so I told them, "Someone needs to be on site. If it happens before I leave for Japan, fabulous. Otherwise, it'll have to happen after I'm back." I had thought that maybe my project manager could do it, and I said, "If you can be there, I trust you to carry it out." He was like, "I'm supposed to be on vacation next week, but I can make myself available" and I said, "Absolutely not." It's just a fact that when people take time off, things take longer, and that's OK. The stair runner was installed at the end of the month, and the client loves it.

Are clients receptive to that?

Look, they definitely have never expressed that they thought this was great for them. But I have a very clear hierarchy of who I belong to and who I answer to, and for me, it's my team first. It's my extended team of vendors and suppliers and partners second and then it's my client. That's probably not what clients want to hear because they're the ones who are paying us. But the thing is that clients are fungible. If you disrespect my team—which I've had happen—you're fired as a client. No one should feel as though their job is worth more than their respect.

We earn our time off. My god, my team works so hard—they're so responsive, so buttoned up, and they care so much, and I think that shows in our work. Breaks are a necessity to [maintain] that level of creativity, commitment and not making mistakes. I would much rather my client be upset that something's not getting done until my team member is back in the office than for them to be upset because my burned-out team member made a mistake. That's something that I can say to my client straight-faced: It's a lot easier to recover from them having some time off than from a major error happening on a project.

What other shifts have you made in your office that might not be typical?

When I was an employee, I hated that I was only ever allowed to have a doctor's appointment at 8:00 a.m. or 6:00 p.m., and even





then, I'd have to ask. So I don't make anyone ask for permission—for things like doctor's appointments, workout classes, pet drop-off, hair appointments. As long as you block your calendar off, I know that you're not available. The team does have to ask to take meaningful time off or if they want to work remotely, but that's really more to make sure that I'm prepared for it, not an actual "permission" thing. For me, it's more about expectation setting and making sure that everyone's clear on who's where.

It only became a thing once, when one of my team members had taken off about three weeks of time in eight months, plus a holiday break. I was like, "All right, we need to pump the brakes a little bit, because I'm not seeing the work." You can take every Friday off if you really need to—if the work is there. We needed to realign on the fact that it is a privilege to take time off and enjoy it without harming the team, but [in that case] her actions were starting to have negative consequences.

How did you handle that situation?

I always start by acknowledging my own feelings about it. This is so therapy talk, but I acknowledge that I'm totally right to be frustrated that this is having an impact on me. The fact that I have to have a conversation about something like that is stressful and difficult, and coming to terms with my own feelings about it before I come to the person on my team is so important. Otherwise, I'm going to start saying things that I don't mean.

The second thing that I have tried to do whenever I've had to have a difficult conversation is to remember that people are human, and that their behavior is not necessarily about me. So often, we think that it's about us when something affects us—that's why it's easy to jump to the conclusion that the employee is taking advantage of our policy. But she might not be. It might be that she's trying to solve something with time off, and it's actually about something bigger. Those are some of the things I thought about to prepare for our conversation.

It wasn't a performance thing—she's really talented—and it wasn't about her being in trouble. It was a bigger conversation about whether there were things about the job or her projects that were causing this desire to be out of the office. It was like, "Hey, this isn't working for me, because sometimes things come up and if I can't get ahold of you this often, that's a problem. I want you to be successful, and I want that to happen here at my firm. But I understand that people can be successful at other firms, and that sometimes there's an employer or a team misfit with someone who's otherwise deeply talented, and I want to be supportive of that." I realized that she was taking time off to try to find more balance in her month

because she was having a hard time achieving that on a daily or weekly level—and I don't know if it was that conversation, or if the conversation was just one small piece of what was going on, but she really turned it around. I've felt her energy lift since then, and I'm super proud of her.

What does it take to apply some of these values and principles to yourself, as well?

There are things that I always make time for—like, I won't cancel therapy. But I had to put that boundary in place for myself, because otherwise I would cancel everything to focus on work.

Are boundaries important for you?

At one point before the pandemic, I realized that I was working way too much and I needed a break, so I decided that I would no longer respond to emails or text messages after 6:30 p.m. But what happened was that clients would come home from work and finally have a chance to see things that came in, and they'd message me in the evening. And even if it was a happy message—"Oh, my god, I love the paint color," or whatever—the hair on my neck would stiffen, my shoulders would come up, I would start breathing differently. I realized that my own boundary was becoming a trigger and I needed to work toward relaxing instead of being so rigid.

I've gradually come to realize that my work is the architecture and the scaffolding around which I can be my best self, have my best friends, live my best life and have all of my dreams come true. The fact that my career is enmeshed with so many other parts of my life—that my travels are enabled because of what I do, and that my husband can join me so that we have time together, and I can have so many of these work trips because I don't need to be so detached from work and I don't need to have a completely rigid break—I have discovered that this is what works for me. Because that's where I'm coming from, I don't really have the same boundaries and I don't really do time off the way that my team may need to do time off. I also understand that I feel differently about the work [now] as a business owner than I did when I worked for other people.

I think that's huge—to not expect your feelings about it to be the same as your team's.

I've heard designers complain that their team doesn't care the way that they do. And I'm like, "Of course they don't." There can be that old-fashioned idea that people should be grateful to have employment, or that they should be grateful to work for you: "You get to go to Paris with me; you're so lucky to have this job." And they might be, but not

when you put it that way. If you tell me I have to be grateful to have this job, then I definitely don't feel grateful now. So the way that I've always approached those beliefs is to say, "I'm lucky to have my life, and a huge part of why I have the life I have is the team that I built to support my dream." If it's also their dream, I'm thrilled. But it doesn't have to be their dream for me to be incredibly lucky, or for them to do the work that they do for our clients and our projects. I'm not here to instruct somebody on what should be important to them. For the ones who do see this as part of their dream, then I hope building this firm alongside me is something that gives them a lot of purpose. If I'm lucky enough to find those people and to cultivate that kind of ambition and passion for the work that we're doing, then I'll be lucky to keep them too.

DIRECTOR'S CHAIR

For several years, **Corey Damen Jenkins** maintained two offices—one in Michigan and another in New York. As he prepared to shutter his firm's Midwest outpost amid the pandemic, he sought to establish a supportive physical and emotional space for his team.

What kind of culture did you want to foster as you started hiring?

A big thing for me was creating an environment that was joyful, inspiring, and mentally and emotionally validating. Being a creative is challenging sometimes. So much of what we deal with is more about the human psyche and the psychology of the process than the actual work itself. In my office, I wanted to make sure that everyone felt welcome. There are going to be differences of opinion or taste, and I wanted a space where no one felt like they couldn't speak up and have their opinions respected.

What does that look like in practice?

Our New York office space is a very ethereal experience on the top floor of this prewar building. When you walk in, you're greeted by these 17-foot ceilings, which are patched with skylights, and the whole area is completely bathed in sunlight. I wanted to be able to say to my staff, "Look up, the sky's literally the limit. Let your imaginations soar." I wanted it to feel like you're in a place where you are safe to create—where you're going to be honored, validated and cherished for your contributions.



PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW FRASZ PHOTOGRAPHY

As you're hiring, it's like casting a movie. You have lead actors and supporting actors, but the entire cast has to get along. In many cases, we invite our entire staff to weigh in, even if they're not in the interview process. It's as simple as asking, What was [your read on] their energy? I like having that conversation with everyone, because they're all going to be working together.

How have you seen that approach pay off?

We have a lot of fun. My team is out in the studio pumping Beyoncé right now—they have their Sonos blaring and they're out there jamming. Around 5 o'clock, we'll crack open a bottle of wine, which is our standard

for Fridays. We get together as a staff to have a little refreshment—crudités or charcuterie board with some wine—and the goal is to not discuss any business, but just to be a work family and vibe off of each other before we go into the weekend. Coming together like that on Fridays keeps the office feeling pretty upbeat and optimistic.

You've prioritized people since you first launched your firm.

My first hires were a good accountant and an HR director. When the firm was based in Michigan and New York, I wanted to make sure that I understood the nuances of the state laws in both places as I was hiring—especially when it comes to independent

contractors versus salaried employees. Early on, those two roles were part-time contractors that I outsourced, and they were able to help me make sound decisions.

Now, we use a professional employment organization, or PEO, to manage things like payroll, time off and benefits, and our director of business development is the liaison with that external HR team. It's important for our employees to have a neutral place to go to discuss anything, whether that's things going on at home or challenges they're facing in the workplace. They should have someplace to discuss that and vent, and not necessarily to me. It helps everyone feel like they are in a safe place.

What is one firm-wide practice that boosted morale?

Every staff member has a business cell phone, which means we never have to invade their personal lives after hours or on the weekend. That's one thing that enables people to really look at this job as a career that has boundaries. In our contracts, we instruct our clients and all of our partners not to contact our employees after business hours, and then we only give them the business numbers for each staff member, which enables them to turn off work when they're done for the day.

What's your approach to bringing your team to High Point?

With all of my licensing commitments, I'm spending most of Market in the showrooms that I have these partnerships with—I'm on the floor introducing buyers to the new collections and showing them how they can use these things, which means I can't go out there and shop and source for our clients. So these days, our design staff will take directives from me [about what we're looking for] and then they'll go do that shopping. Part of that is about logistical support, but it's also about growth and development as well. From an operations standpoint, it's also important for them to meet the reps and salespeople who they correspond with every day—the people they're working with to get the chandelier in on time, or to replace this lamp that got smashed—and to build a rapport in person. That makes it easier for them to work things out or ask for favors when necessary.

It's also a good reminder that you aren't the one placing the order for the lamp, so the relationship that your team has with your vendors is important to invest in.

Exactly. I'm not doing any of that. So when our operations manager or our design team run into so-and-so from Currey & Company or Kravet or Maitland-Smith at Market, it becomes more than just a name. I tell them, "This is very important to our growth as a

business: You need to meet these people! That way, you don't need to rely on me to put the fires out or make the big phone calls."

For your staff members, it must feel good to be empowered to solve problems on their own. I think a lot of employees don't have that in their design jobs.

A lot of designers take a very territorial approach with their staff. They don't want anyone to know who works for them—and I totally get it, because poaching does happen. But at the same time, it's almost like a parent with their children: You can't continue to carry them across the street when they're eight years old. If the company is going to grow and thrive, it can't all be dependent on me to manage every single issue. And the best way to do that is to let the [team] feel empowered to step out there and lead their own relationships. It takes trust.

You recently shuttered your Michigan office amid the pandemic—but you did so with a very thoughtful, human approach. What did that require of you as a business owner?

The firm had operated with offices in Michigan since 2009 and New York since 2018. When the pandemic hit, the lease on the office in Michigan coincidentally came up for renewal. There was just so much uncertainty with the shutdown, and it didn't seem prudent at the time to continue to maintain two offices and two sets of staff—especially when we were already doing everything remotely. So I decided not to renew. That meant giving my Michigan staff 11 months' notice of my intentions.

I know a lot of employers would not do that—and I completely understand that strategically, because if you give them too much time, then you don't know when they're going to leave. If you've given them permission to look elsewhere, and then you really need them, you can be up a creek without resources. But I adored my staff in Michigan. I know that they have families to take care of, and in some cases they're the sole breadwinner. It didn't feel right to not give them that advance notice—we'd had several years of no turnover, and I felt like they had earned that loyalty from me. So I told them, "I'm giving you this notice so that you can land on your feet safely."

Moving the firm to New York full-time also meant that we needed to staff up here, because none of our Michigan team could make that leap logistically. It was definitely an undertaking to find a brand-new team—or to cast a new movie, as we discussed earlier—and then to introduce them to our existing team in New York, our client base and licensing partnerships, and for everyone to respect the existing processes and brand.

It was one of the hardest transitions I've ever had to make—especially because we were still working full-time on our projects and partnerships throughout that shift.

As your team grows, how do you get comfortable with your changing role as an employer?

It's about spending personal time with each team member one-on-one. I may take one team member with me as my corporate date for the Kip's Bay President's Dinner, and then a different member to another event. Or maybe we're invited to a showroom opening, and I'll take two team members. It gives us a chance to spend more time together, and no one feels like they're being neglected. There are also days when I can get out there in the studio and work alongside the team. My

ABOVE: Corey Damen Jenkins thoughtfully outfitted his light-filled New York office to create a safe haven and foster inspiration for his team.

office is for private calls, staff meetings, client meetings and confidential business stuff. But I love being out in the studio, snapping my fingers and singing along with Beyoncé, like everybody else. And I think that when the team sees you out there working with them, it makes them feel good.

I'm not trying to be Miranda Priestly. I think that if principals can just take the edge off and trust a bit more, they can command respect without being unapproachable. I'm an Aries: If you get on my bad side, I can bring out the Miranda, and our contractors can confirm that. Because look, I still have a business to run, and sometimes, you *do* need to give staff constructive feedback. But even then, I call it "constructive feedback" instead of "constructive criticism," because I don't want to criticize anyone. We have those





tough conversations sometimes, and that's how the team learns to respect you: because you're being honest.

And that's how you grow.

I think sometimes principals can almost cower in fear of losing team members when the work is overwhelming and you need help. I've been guilty of this in the past: You're afraid that if you give constructive feedback, or if you tell an employee that they have to be on time every day, or that they're slacking off and they need to be more diligent—you think that person might leave. And yes, that might happen. But if it does, then that person's not meant to be with you.

My team will tell you: I'm nice, but don't get it twisted. I have high expectations for us because our clients have high expectations

for us, and we're not going to compromise on our standards. But there's a way to find the balance. If you're kind to people, and you spend time together over wine and a charcuterie board on a regular basis, then when you do have that constructive feedback conversation, it's hard for them to take it personally because they know that you care about them. When principals don't do the other stuff and then they give you the tough conversation, that's when you think, "My boss doesn't like me."

So it's important to make time for personal connection.

Exactly. We look forward to unwinding at the end of the day on Friday, when we get to connect—and then we all go into the weekend feeling refreshed.

HEAD COACH

After years of hustling to grow her business, **Rachel Nelson** realized she needed to make a change. The Detroit-based designer got serious about her own professional reset with the help of a coach—then tapped that same coach to work with her team. The goal? A work environment that puts mental health first.

What made you want to prioritize your team's mental health?

Not to toot my own horn, but I am a high achiever. I want to be challenged. Before I founded Concetti eight years ago, I was part of work cultures that looked at people like me and said, "This one works hard. Let's rope her in." Suddenly you're working evenings, then weekends, and not ever getting a break or being compensated for your time. I've been in those environments, and you burn out and it creates resentment.

It takes a lot of gumption to start your own business, and I was in a hustle mentality for a long time to make sure that this company got up and running. I attended an event with a networking group for women entrepreneurs—it was a panel discussion about your nervous system and taking care of yourself, and as I listened, I had tears streaming down my face. I realized, "This is me. I've been neglecting this part of myself."

After the presentation, I made eye contact with Samantha Schmuck—she was one of the founders of this organization, but she's also a holistic life coach—and we made a beeline for each other. I'd only met her once and I didn't really know her, but she hugged me while I cried. "I need help," I told her. And she was like, "We can do this." I'm proud of the fact that I can put my blinders on and hustle, but we're not meant to live like that.

How did that relationship change your approach?

When I started working with Samantha in 2019, I still had subcontractors on my team instead of employees. In January 2020, I offered all my subcontractors employment. Then the pandemic hit. We were working from home, and my employees were saying, "I'm having trouble separating work from home life." Everyone was stressed.

That's when I started talking to Sam about working with the whole team too—talking about stress management and tools to separate work from life, and opening up dialogue around how we show up as a team and how we want to treat each other. We started meeting on a monthly basis, and created our team agreements, which is our promise to each other. It was a lot of change and a lot of work. But it was worth it.

In this field, there is a lot of high energy. You've got to act quickly, and you can burn out. One of the team members said it felt



like we're running a marathon forever. I knew I wasn't alone—I was talking to other interior designers and they were saying, "Gosh, this is hard. I'm tired. My staff is tired." One day after talking to my team about it, I just decided: We're having quarterly mental health breaks, and they're paid. Done.

How does that work?

In the first and the third quarters, they get Thursday and Friday off, and that Wednesday is a VIP day with Samantha. We also vote on what kind of team-building activity we want—we've done candle-making with essential oils and had a tarot card reader come in. It just has to be something that nurtures us and sets the tone for a four-day weekend. Then in the second and fourth quarters, they get a full paid week off in addition to the VIP day.

One of my favorite things we've done as a team was hire an astrologer who does human design readings, which explores how you're innately wired and who you are as a person. It was really cool because everybody felt so validated. I'm a [personality type called] "manifesting generator"—most of our designers are—which means we have a ton of energy. We keep going and going and going, and we fuel energy to those around

us. But somebody on our team is a "projector," which is a totally different way of being. She absorbs all of our energy. When she's around us, she gets a jolt of energy, but it can also be draining to her. A huge part of being a projector is needing downtime. She had always judged herself—like, "Am I lazy? Why do I need this?" This exercise showed her, "No, you are not. That's just who you are." The more we know about ourselves, the more we have permission to be who we are; the more we know about our co-workers, the more we can support them.

Have you felt the difference after investing that time and energy in team connection?

It really changed the team's morale. I was surprised in a good way by the feedback. The team was saying, "When everybody's off, we all really log off." I realized that before, we'd all been still checking our email or Slack channels and trying to stay up to date when we were on vacation. But now, when we're not working, we all really unplug. I think so many of us feel guilty for taking time off.

Now, we [give ourselves] permission to slow down and fill our cup without guilt or judgment, and then people come back refreshed. When we do that, we're the best version of ourselves. And when we come together as the best versions of ourselves, we're really there to take care of our team, and therefore our clients.

How has that mindset impacted your approach to more day-to-day business decisions?

Another thing we came up with are focus weeks, which are the last week of every month. We don't take any client appointments that week, which allows us to have more heads-down time. The client work continues—the designers have deliverables





they're working on—but not having any meetings frees up my time to dive into operations, financials, our marketing plan and strategy, and to do invoices.

One of my pain points was all of those tasks that need to get done on a monthly basis. If I'm still meeting with clients—because I'm a designer and the CEO—then I'm working 60-hour-plus weeks, which is not healthy. I didn't want my team to burn out, but I wasn't walking the walk. At one point, one of my employees said to me, "When I see you struggling, I want to step in. I don't want to leave you over there treading water, I want to come help"—even though that means that she has to come tread with me. I heard that and realized I didn't want that for my team. Now I'm really taking that

ABOVE:

In a bold basement lounge that needed to provide space for entertaining, exercise and rest, Rachel Nelson deployed lush berry tones, playful patterns and brass accents that glimmer in the low lighting as a backdrop for both relaxation and rejuvenation.

time every month to make sure that I have the headspace to keep the business healthy.

You recently hired two employees. As you grow your team, how do you make sure you remain just as focused on company culture?

A lot of culture comes down to two things: operations and expectations. As our team grows and clear departments form, we're talking about what that interdepartmental communication looks like as you're passing the torch from one area to the other. If operations are sloppy, confusing or chaotic, that's not a very fun environment. On the expectations side, one of our team agreements is owning how you show up and the energy that you put out. If you're stressed, don't

project that on to others—that type of thing. Also, always assuming that the other person has good intentions. If something ruffles your feathers, don't assume it's malicious, because that's not acceptable here, and set about solving what is probably an innocent misunderstanding.

I have learned that no matter how qualified a candidate is, you have to hire people who value these same things. As much as you can see the potential in someone, if they're not open to all this—if they're not going to be truthful or self-aware—then it's not going to work. Today, the first interview includes Sam, and it's very clear: This is our wellness coach, who helps pull us together as a team and be self-reflective. A lot of our questions during the first interview are about company culture. Then, if that feels good, I go into their actual qualifications—but I won't go further unless we're on the same page that this person is going to add to the culture.

When a new employee starts, they work one-on-one with Sam to help establish their workflow and to adapt to block scheduling. She's there to offer stress management and, if needed, emotional support—people can open up as much or as little as they want to, and it's not reported back to me. She just holds space for people because a new job is exciting, but it's also a big change.

I don't mean to be cynical, but having a coach on call sounds very expensive. How do you think about those costs?

You know what's more expensive? Turnover. That's what costs companies the most. I'm not an instant gratification person—I will put in the time to build a strong foundation, and I want to do it right, knowing that eventually things will be what they need to be. When I started doing this [work and implementing these systems with Sam], a couple of team members looked at me like I had 10 heads, and eventually both of them left on their own. It will weed people out.

It comes down to standing in your truth and being your authentic self. The empathy piece of this goes against the traditional idea of what being a boss is supposed to be. But as cheesy as it sounds, when you are boldly radiating who you are, the right people will come. It is hard to do—it doesn't come easily and it takes a minute to get it right—but it's important to take steps toward your truth even when the outside world hasn't caught up yet.

It is an investment, but I definitely believe that the benefits pay off tenfold, because if you have retention, you have happy people, and if you have happy people, you usually have happy clients. You spend so much time at work, so let's make it an environment that is going to positively impact who you are and how you show up in life, not suck you dry. ■