



The Reboot Bet

CASE STUDY:

MATHEW BELLOWS

CEO of Yesware

In 2011, Yesware founder and CEO Matthew Bellows found himself in an exciting but daunting position. The company, started a year earlier in Boston, was designed to help salespeople and sales managers work more efficiently. Yesware was freshly backed with top-tier venture capital and had tremendous potential before them.

In this interview, we walk through Matt's journey through the radical self-inquiry, honest shared experiences and personal growth that have led to his ever-evolving leadership style.



Amidst the excitement, Matthew was seized with fear. What if he and Yesware squandered all this potential? What if the company didn't take advantage of this opportunity?

To help him understand this fear, come to terms with it, and maybe use it as a source of power, Matthew turned to Reboot.

Matthew's initial search for an executive coach had started before he founded Yesware. He was VP of sales at a startup and wanted someone to mirror his blind spots back to him, to be a sounding board, but also to provide some accountability on what he thought he was doing versus what he was actually doing.

He interviewed with a dozen or more executive coaches but couldn't seem to find any who resonated with him. He wasn't looking for a ra-ra productivity coach, didn't need a drill sergeant, and wasn't looking to start therapy. He needed someone who could draw upon deep business experience, but who combined this with something more unique in executive coaching: applying emotional intelligence to the startup experience.



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When Yesware started taking off, Matthew wasn't spurred by any personal crisis to revisit his search for an executive coach, but rather he felt a deep desire to give himself and his company the best shot he could. Knowing that the company was going to grow and deeply wanting his company to do well, Matthew felt an immense amount of pressure.

So he spoke with Brad Feld, an investor in Yesware, and Feld recommended Jerry Colonna. Jerry is an executive coach and founder of Reboot. “If you can't get Jerry, don't bother with anyone else,” Feld told Matthew. In this interview, we walk through Matthew's journey with Reboot through the radical self-inquiry, honest shared experiences, and personal growth that have all contributed to his ever-evolving leadership style.

Matthew initially began individual coaching sessions with Jerry in 2011. Matthew described the conversations as “Completely unpredictable.” But he learned simple techniques to ground himself. For example, before calls with Jerry, he “...takes ten to 15 minutes to check in with myself. I ask ‘How do I feel and where in my body do I feel it?’ It's like doing stretches before seeing the trainer.” He knows that Jerry will ask him to check in, so he prepares himself in advance.

The one on one conversations with Jerry can range from topics as concrete as discussing board relations to larger conversations around Matthew's underlying drivers for success. Matthew describes Reboot's approach as “Distinguished by the combination of deep business experience with deep emotional intelligence, inquiry and curiosity.” Frequently, coaches favor either business or emotions too heavily, but Matthew says Jerry and Reboot bring the two together, explaining the impact of one on the other. Many of us viscerally know that business pressures affect emotions and vice versa. Identifying and vocalizing this link is a powerful tool that Matthew has been able to adopt into his daily practice.



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The Tough Conversations

In addition to Jerry's coaching, Matthew benefited from other Reboot offerings, including the CEO bootcamp and Reboot's 360 reviews. In one particular instance, Matthew requested one Reboot service, but ended up receiving a different, more necessary one.

Jerry and Khalid Halim were scheduled to fly to Boston to facilitate an executive offsite about developing Yesware values. Within ten minutes, the Reboot team figured out what really needed to be discussed. Instead of values, the team spent the day discussing and unravelling a lot of built up tension amongst the executive team, mostly directed at Matthew himself.

"It was real and intense. It took a lot of effort and a lot of bravery for my team to share what they did that day." Matthew remembers. With the help of Jerry and Khalid, the team created an environment where everyone could feel comfortable voicing challenges they had with him as the CEO. Matthew, though aware that these challenges within his personality existed, had no idea of the magnitude or impact it had on the team as a whole. This kind of candid feedback is difficult to hear and digest, but ultimately helped everyone to grow closer as a team and as a company. It also provided the opportunity to course correct, rather than blindly and obliviously marching down the wrong path, a valuable lesson for Matthew and Yesware.

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The Biggest Leadership Challenge

Reboot and Jerry provided the mirror and guidance Bellows needed to overcome his most difficult leadership experience in his time as CEO. Yesware was in the early stages of revenue growth and the sales team wasn't hitting their quotas. The irony of a startup designed to help sales teams not hitting its own quotas was not lost on Bellows. Matthew was operating as the VP of Sales and the CEO at the same time, making it difficult for him to fully commit to either position. Through coaching and sessions with Jerry, he came to realize that though he is a great salesperson, he's not a great sales manager, and in fact performs best as CEO. Introspection and guidance led Matthew to insight into his need to be invulnerable, immutable and good at everything; an internal drive that was no longer serving him. He came to understand the need to let go of the previous ties sales had to his self-image. After a few months of personal inquiry, he delegated the role to a sales expert and let go of that responsibility so he could turn his full attention toward being a leader for his company. The sales team is now consistently hitting their quotas and Matthew has the space to look ahead and lead the executive team.

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360 Reviews

Bellows has also worked with Reboot on two 360 reviews, and credits the valuable information he got from them to the skills of the interviewers in extracting useful feedback from participants. The feedback shapes the leader he is every day, and provides reference points in his personal journey. The most recent review revealed tendencies that likely sound familiar to CEOs or the colleagues who work with them. Matthew can be overly involved in the work, too optimistic and can launch “sneak attacks” if he doesn’t have full visibility into projects. Thanks to the 360 reviews, he now understands that this just transfers the pressure to others and makes them uncomfortable speaking with him. The optimism, quite a common characteristic among startup CEOs, can distort his sense of the obstacles the business faces. It causes others to think he doesn’t appreciate how difficult something is to accomplish, and thus that he undervalues their efforts.

After such honest critical feedback, it would have been easy to bury the new information about himself in a drawer, but he instead chose to lead by example and share it with the rest of the company. Because Matthew was brave enough to share his own struggles, he lays the foundation for others within Yesware to feel comfortable sharing their own feelings and challenges at work. Matthew’s conversations with Jerry helped him understand the information that the 360 review produced, and to share with the rest of the company without the fear that it would be an existential threat. He now goes out of his way to recognize people and their efforts, both publicly and privately, he avoids sneak attacks, and ultimately creates a more supportive environment for his leadership team. There is, however, also an element of owning his optimism, a strength which he attributes part of his success to. This is true for all of us, our greatest strengths can be our biggest downfalls, but this understanding can help us hone those strengths and fuel our progress.

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Matthew's Progress and The Radical Self-Inquiry Ahead

All of this work with Jerry and Reboot has been the catalyst for huge advancement in Matthew's professional life. Of the work Bellows continues to do on radical self-inquiry, he says, "Some themes stay consistent. I still think about what it means to be a man and a leader, I keep in mind the link between emotional and business state." As for the any residual issues around the relationship between individual self-worth and business worth? Today less of Bellows' intrinsic worth is tied to the success of the company. Jerry asks, "If the worst thing happens, what would you do then? What happens next?" and this helps keep these issues in perspective. A relentless probing into the biggest fears Matthew has for his company has allowed him to see how fortunate he is to have these problems, and takes away some of the power from those fears.

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Bellows has also placed more emphasis on the connection between the physical and emotional states, "I've been exercising more. I train for events and follow through." Bellows says that when he's out of touch with his body, he's a blur of thoughts, fears and emotional states, which makes it incredibly difficult to be effective in his leadership role. Exercising provides a way to stay grounded so he can be more present for the team and the challenges he's facing. Coaching has helped him join his work and non-work life.

Of course coaching and radical self-inquiry is a constant work in progress. Bellows says his emotions are still variable, but he's much more in touch with them now than he was before. There's a greater appreciation in how work can be a transformative personal experience. With a group of people and pressures, it can be a vehicle for personal growth. He's more confident in dealing with challenges, has more perspective, and is comfortable with his "shadow side." Even this ability to use terms like "shadow side," the unnamed stuff going on inside that can consume an immense amount of energy, provides context to the problem and diminishes the power it holds.



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Yesware’s Transformation Into A “Special Place To Work”

The impact on the Yesware team has also been pretty remarkable. “A lot of people at Yesware would have quit a long time ago if I hadn’t been in coaching” Bellows says. He now consistently hears that Yesware is a special place to work. Yesware has now raised \$35 million from investors, is growing fast toward \$50 million in revenue and has over 100 employees. These transitions have created a lot of business decisions to discuss in individual sessions, boot camps, or 360 reviews, but Matthew ultimately got the results he wanted. The team is successful, both from business and emotional perspectives.



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Reboot’s Role

Jerry, for his part, says there’s a methodology behind this growth process Matthew is currently experiencing. Generally, clients find an executive coach for help with a specific practical problem and after unpacking that, they move on to a deeper issue. Eventually this leads to enhanced leadership, greater resiliency and being their own internal coach for themselves and their team. Just as a child moves through the stages of development, they never stop being the child but the relationship evolves. Both parties can eventually come to realize this beautiful moment when the coaching work is done and it’s a recognition from the client that they’re able to move forward on their own. “Good coaching generally results in self-sustaining clients so they can be a mindful leader who can coach themselves and their teams,” Colonna says. He goes on to explain that “Within a post-graduate company you hear: ‘We are stuck on x..Can we have a chat?’ It’s a spot treatment. Sessions come up around individual topics.” Many continuing clients enjoy having the coach as a resource in the company, as long as there isn’t a dependency.

Matthew first found Reboot as a fearful, overburdened CEO full of hope. Today he is an effective leader with the same hope, but fewer fears of failure and more support for his team. He recently turned 48 and though he still has a tremendous amount of work ahead, has more clarity around the work he needs to do to be a leader. “I finally know what I’m good at doing. Now it’s a matter of doing it for the next 10-20 years and facing all those challenges.” The work is his path for personal growth and pursuing it for the next 20 years.

