



March 20-24, 2023
San Francisco, CA

Creative Direction 101: Improve Your Creative Direction and Feedback

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#GDC23

Hello! Thanks for coming everyone!

I came to GDC for my first and only time 11 years ago. I walked away from the conference inspired, giving myself a goal.

The next time I come back to GDC it will be to give a talk. Over the next 11 years many ideas came and went, but nothing really stuck until this talk.

I am giving this talk because of a question I have gotten several times over the last few years. "How do I become a creative director?"

I can't speak to exactly how to become a Creative Director. I don't have a 10 point plan that can be followed. Everyone's journey is different and varied.

I can, however, speak to the foundational and fundamental elements to being a Creative Director. Because I believe...

Creative direction is a skill

It can be learned

It can be taught

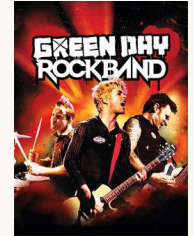
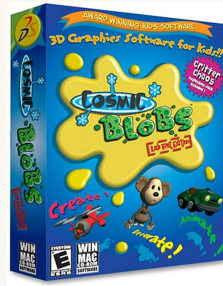
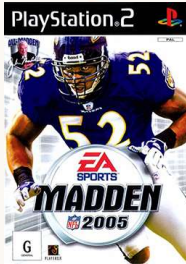
It requires consistent practice

Who am I?

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So who am I and why am I qualified to give talk about the fundamentals of creative direction?



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I got my start at EA all the way back in 2004 as a QA tester on Madden 2004.

I then finished my degree in Computer Engineering at Villanova and then worked at Solidworks on children's modeling software called Cosmic Blobs as a QA engineer.

After that I went to a small company at the time called Demiurge Studios. We focused on co-development and support. I got my first chance as designer here. Learned a lot different ways of working, and different approaches to creativity.

These experiences were foundational, but I had not yet stepped into the role of creative leadership.



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Then I went to Bungie and worked on the Destiny franchise for 9.5 years. The last 5 years in a leadership capacity, and 4 of those 5 in a director capacity where I focused on delivering seasonal content.

And now most recently at Respawn on Apex Legends for about the last 18 months as Senior Design Director where I oversee the entirety of Apex's creative direction.

My experience at Bungie and at Respawn inform the bulk of what I believe to be the fundamentals of creative direction.

My lessons and experience is drawn from live service development with large teams. 300+ devs. We will dive deep into foundational leadership principles that I believe are transferable to all sorts of development.

That said, you may have to modify and make it your own if you feel your situation is unique. Happy to talk about it after we are done.

Who is this talk for?

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So who is this talk for?

It's for the aspiring creative leader. You are just starting out and you have that burning question "how do I become a Creative Director?"

It's for the veteran creative leader. You have been through your fair share of development cycles, and you have the scars to prove it. You know how to become a "Creative Director," but could use a bit of inspiration and are eager to learn a new approach.

And maybe you're neither, but I still think the fundamentals of creative direction can be relevant anyone working in a creative field. I am going to focus on how to build a strong creative culture, and the skill of communicating and collaborating effectively with a team.

The Skill of Creative Direction

- Building the Mindset of a Leader
- Empowering the Team
- Honest and Direct Communication

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Developing the skill of creative direction requires focus in three major fundamental areas.

- Building the mindset of a leader. Working on yourself as a person and as a leader.
- Empowering the Team. Building trust with the people around you and empowering the team to do their best work.
- Honest and direct communication. Develop the ability to have honest and direct conversations with the people you work with and lead. Lean into difficult conversations that generate positive outcomes.

Building the Mindset of a Leader

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So let's talk about building the mindset of a leader. It is foundational to everything a Creative Director does.

Building the Mindset of a Leader

- Know Yourself
- Become Fearless
- Lead with Vulnerability
- Be Curious

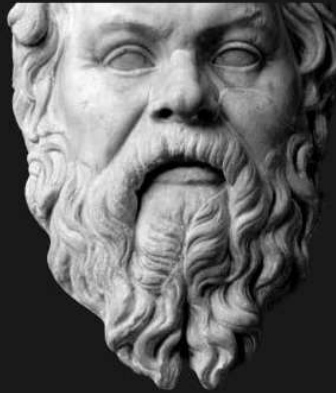
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Developing the skill of creative direction requires focus in three major areas.

- Know yourself. Working to truly get to know yourself, what you value.
- Become fearless. Letting go of fear and turning that fear into a force for positive change.
- Lead with Vulnerability. Being out front and taking that first step when the outcome is unpredictable. Handling failure publicly. Setting the tone for the team.
- Be Curious. Flexing your curiosity muscle. Challenging your assumptions, revealing your blind spots, and pushing back against the status quo.

KNOW THYSELF



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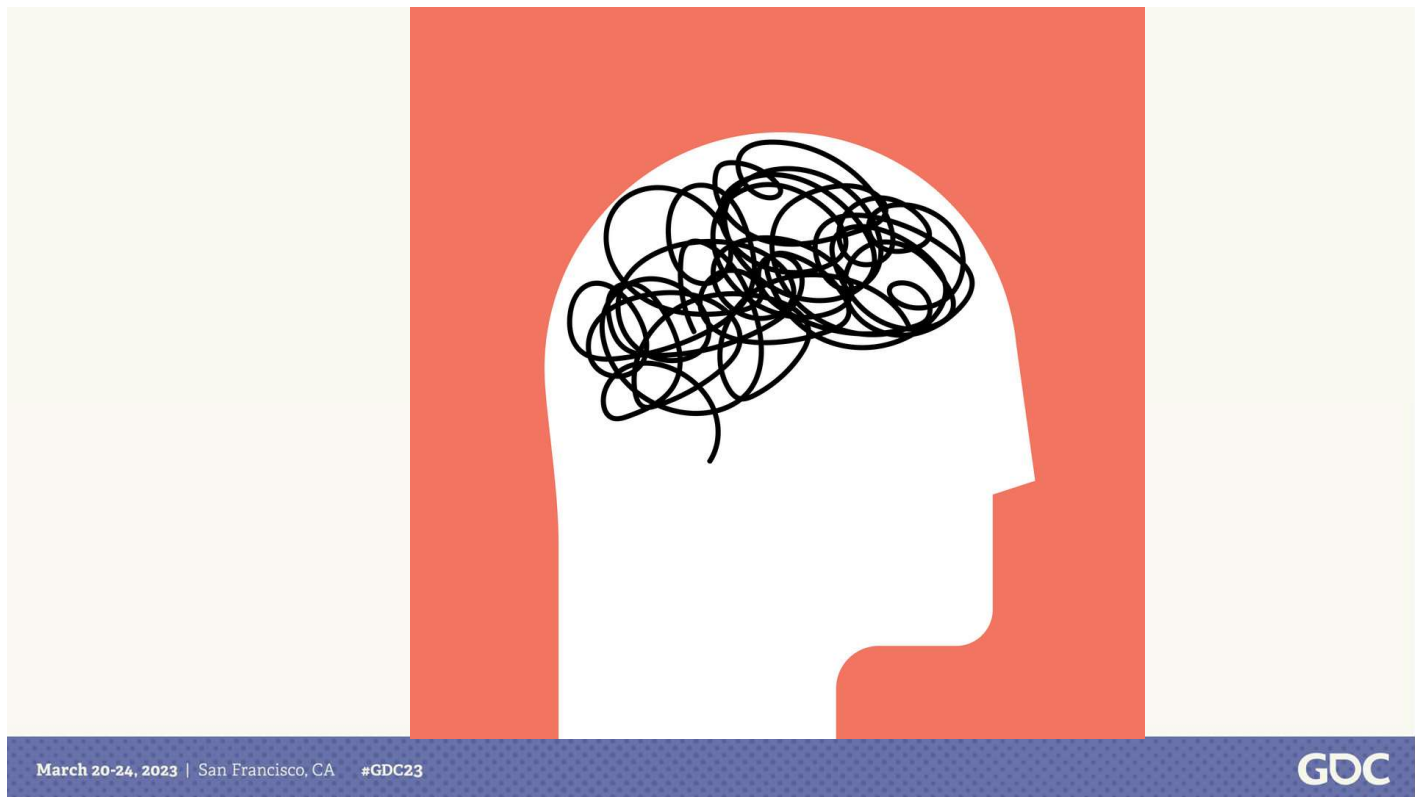
Aristotle said "Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom"

Knowing yourself is the first step in building a strong leadership mindset. Know what you value and what you stand for. What are your core principles? What are your core motivations?

Strive to understand your authentic self. When you can be your authentic self, you can inspire those around you to follow you.

Think back to your own experiences. Who has inspired you? Whose vision to did you excitedly buy into?

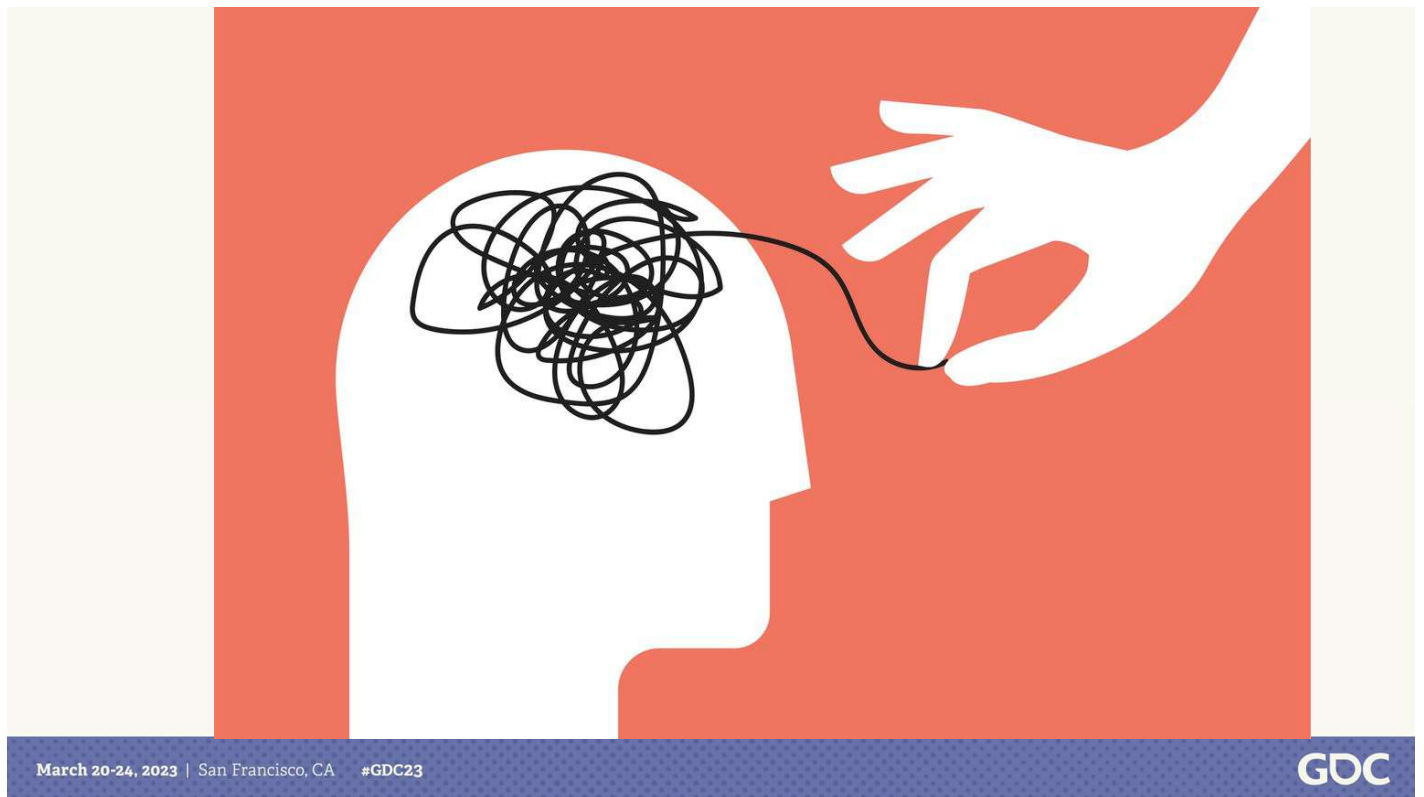
I know was most inspired to follow were the people that were authentic.



It is hard work to get to know yourself!

We are constantly in our own minds, trying to make sense of the world. It can feel like a jumbled mess. We have friends, family, hobbies, our own physical health, and so forth to keep up on. Career and is just one part of it.

We all have so much going on, but...

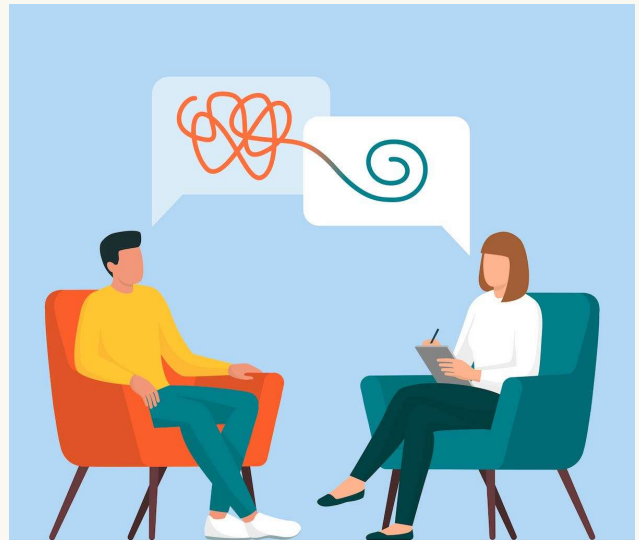


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It is vital we make the time to untangle our minds. Unwind why we do what we do and get to know ourselves.

It is going to take time and patience to untangle everything that is going on. Mentally and emotionally. Your conscience and sub-conscience. Be prepared to make it a habit of sorting your thoughts and emotions.



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For myself, I have found journaling effective. Getting my thoughts on paper helps organize my mind. Once something is on paper I can play with it and start figuring it out.

And I can journal in quick bursts or more meditative. Get out some intense emotion I maybe feeling in the moment, or do a more thoughtful decompression.

Another practice for me is talk therapy. I have been in talk therapy for the last 10 years and it's been critical for me to untangle my mind. If you are lucky enough to have access to good therapy options, I highly recommend it.

The main thing, though, is it is important to have trusted people you can talk to. People who can give you perspective, provide guidance, and bolster confidence. Life is complicated and challenging. Trying to go it alone is a significant difficulty multiplier. It is okay to ask for help.



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So why do you want to do all this mental and emotional work?

So you can understand your core values. Core values are way of "being."
How you live your life. How you practice your craft.

Example Core Values

- Honesty and Integrity
- Hard Work
- Create Joy
- Be Present

For example, my core values are:

- Honesty and Integrity
- Hard work
- Create joy
- Be present

Once you have your core values understood, be open to evolving them. You will be constantly having new life experiences that will inform your values. My values from 5 years ago are not the same as my values today. For example my value of "Be Present" only came about recently because I became a parent in the last few years.

When you understand your core values, you can be your authentic self. And when you can be authentic self you can really inspire others.

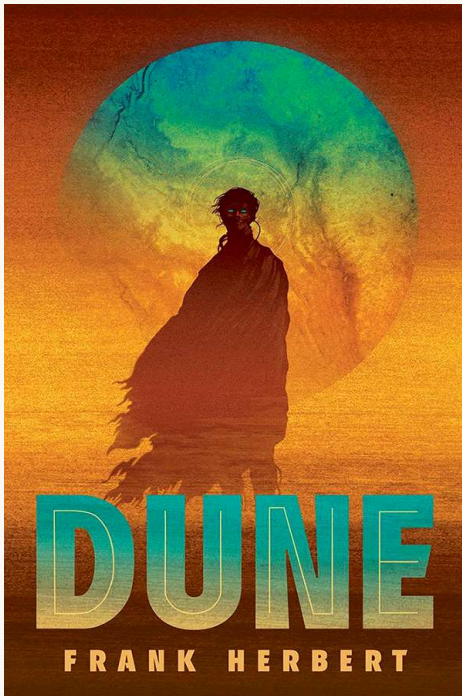
Become Fearless

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Become fearless.

Learning to let go of fear is key in unlocking your creative powers.



“Fear is the mind killer.”

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“I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.”

Great passage from Dune. It is a bit intense, but there is valuable perspective in there. You need to let go of fear.

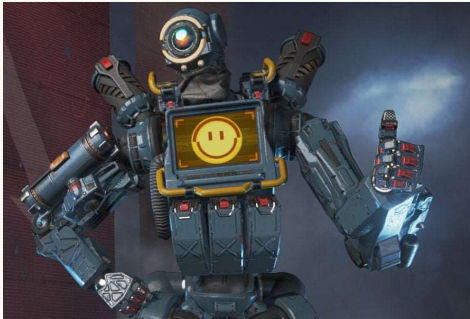
I will never forget in a 1-on-1 several years ago my at the time manager told me “I want you to stop saying ‘I’m worried. I’m concerned. My fear is.’ Focus on what CAN be done and not what CAN’T.”

This had a massive impact on me. From the moment on, in every interaction I had, I would stop myself from saying “worry, concern, fear, etc” and focus on the positive.

Focus on what CAN be done. How can I take this fearful feeling and turn into something for good?



I'm worried. This character is weak.



Where can we boost this character?

An example is "I am worried that this character's kit is falling flat and feeling weak. I fear if we ship it like this, players will hate it." Simply, this character is weak. All negative, no action.

It be can be reframed as "This character's kit is feeling underpowered. We have a good opportunity here to give them a boost." That simple reframing, turning fear into an opportunity can seem small, but it powerful. It drives towards action.

From there follow up "What do we think about the kit is making it feel weak? Is the abilities themselves lacking punch? Or is it a read-ability issue with the placeholder VFX we are using?" Work to frame the problem space. Seek understand the root of the fear.

Become Fearless

- Fear is part of the process
- Don't let fear hold you back
- Fear is contagious
- Focus on positive change

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Fear is part of the creative process. It is fine to feel fear and you should acknowledge it. You probably not doing anything that exciting if there is no fear! The key is learning to control that fear, understand, and deploy in a positive direction.

Fear will hold you back if you let it. Game designers are great at edge casing themselves to death. It can paralyze a team. It is on you, the leader, to be bold, to take risk. Will you fail and falter? Yes, and you will probably fail more often that you succeed. Creativity it an iterative process! Look at failure as an opportunity to learn.

Fear is contagious. If you are fearful, the team will become fearful. You need to be the calm presence. If let go of your fear, you can be more effective in helping others.

Focus on positive change. Turn fear from something that holds the team back to something that unlocks progress. Frame fear as opportunity. Work to clearly define the problems that the fear is rooted in.

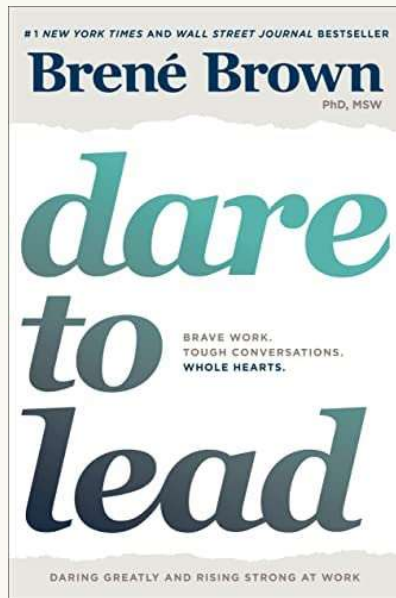
If you can work on this, if you can let go of your fear, you can unlock your true creative potential.

Lead with Vulnerability

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"The courage to be vulnerable is not about winning or losing, it's about the courage to show up when you can't predict or control the outcome"



“The courage to be vulnerable is not about winning or losing, it’s about the courage to show up when you can’t predict or control the outcome.”

- Brené Brown

So much about creative direction is out of your control. You are at best making an educated guess at where you should take the game. The creative process is highly iterative, and you will feel like you are flailing around. You might even feel like you are failing the team.

I assure you; this is normal. You need to be vulnerable in these moments. To show up and face the fear, uncertainty, and frustrations head on.

Everyone is looking to you and need to set the tone how to handle these challenges. That failing is part of the creative process, you will work together to overcome the challenges you face.

Lead with Vulnerability

- You are out front, set the tone
- Transparency is key
- Necessary to be authentic

To be vulnerable means you are out front. You are the first to open up. You are the first to be critiqued. You be the first to grapple with unpredictable problems of development and admit that is a challenge. You need to set the tone for things to be open and transparent.

Transparency is key. Being transparent allows you welcome others into the process. This will help you gain perspective. This will let people know that asking for help is okay. Together you'll find the solution.

It's necessary to be vulnerable to be authentic. Remember, when you are your authentic self, you can inspire.

Being vulnerable is TOUGH. It is only natural to want to protect yourself. I know you can do it.



POINTS AWARDED												
14+	13, 12, 11	10, 9	8, 7	6	5	4	3	2	1	Place		
0	5	10	20	30	45	55	70	95	125	RP		
1	5	10	12	14	16	18	20	23	25	Kill/Assist RP		

The value of each kill will be adjusted based on match placement, kills per match, tier difference, and participation.

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Leading with vulnerability was important when we rolled out Ranked Reloaded in May of 2022.

We overhauled the ranked scoring system this season to be placement focused versus kills focused. We also added demotions, so players could de-level out of their tier. This was done in an attempt build a stronger competitive experience.

I knew this was going to be controversial, and I pushed the team to be bold. The ranked system in the season prior we felt was not reflective of high skilled Apex play. We wanted to put focus on winning a match versus dropping hot and racking up kills.

And it worked. It definitely changed players' behavior.



Why The New Ranked Experiment Has Failed..

57K views · 9 months ago



MangosinTrees

Season 13 Ranked Apex Legends.

Apex Legends players slam "grindy" Ranked Reloaded changes in Season 13

Philip Trahan | Published: May 15, 2022, 17:28 | Updated: May 15, 2022, 17:28

Apex Legends Players Express Outrage Over Ranked Reloaded Matchmaking

By Jack O'Dwyer | Jun 9, 2022

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And there was backlash. And I expected black lash, but maybe not to this degree. I knew, though, bringing change is challenging.

Internally people were worried and frustrated. It is tough see negative sentiment and not let it affect you.

I owned the decision, though. I acknowledged that things were, rough, and my direction drove the cause of it. I needed the help of the team, though, as there were valuable lessons to be learned. We had a vibrant player base that was engaging with the game and we were getting much more competitive matches. Something was working.

I felt like this was the right direction and needed to keep iterating. We needed to focus on making informed adjustments, and I routinely told the team I had their backs.

And while there was a desire to pivot and go back to the old ranked system, we stayed course. We wanted ranked to be a better reflection of skilled Apex play.

Why Apex Legends' Ranked Changes are For The Best

After Season 15's Ranked split controversy, Respawn is rebuilding good will among players with some much-needed changes to Apex Legends.

BY CAMERON WONG PUBLISHED MAR 12, 2023



The ONLY 4 Tips You Need To Rank Up FAST (Apex Legends)

22K views • 2 days ago

MangosInTrees

Ranked Tips Apex Legends How to Reach Diamond Rank in Apex Legends MangosInTrees Apex Legends.

New

Apex Legends' new playlist the perfect place to warm up for ranked

Apex Legends' Mixtape playlist is being added to Respawn Entertainment's battle royale during the Imperial Guard Collection Event on PlayStation, Xbox, and PC.

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And over time and with focus we have made improvements.

We stayed active and engaged. The one Youtuber who told us our experiment failed made a guide for the latest season.

We are now providing new ways for players to practice and improve their skills for ranked play.

And we are not done. Still got plenty to improve on, match making being a big one. We still are constantly learning from the community.

The important thing is that I handled the backlash head on. I owned it. I showed the team even through a tough period, I was going to go through it with them.

Be Curious

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“Be curious, not judgmental.”
- *Misattributed to Walt Whitman*

I love this quote and the love this scene from Ted Lasso. After some research is misattributed to Walt Whitman, though. The origin actually isn't known.

That said, I think it is a powerful statement. Be curious about the world around you and the people in it.

Be Curious

- Challenge your own assumptions
- Question the status quo
- You can learn from anyone

Challenge your own assumptions. Challenge your ideas, philosophies, and practices. To innovate you need to seek out our blind spots. Get curious about your team and your players why they do what they do. I guarantee you will be surprised with some of your findings. Those are the areas of opportunity.

Question the status quo of how things have “always been done”. Look for the inefficiencies in your process and opportunities to grow. To surprise and delight players, you need to break away from the rote ways of doing things.

And importantly, know you can learn from anyone. Ask thoughtful questions about why the things are, up and down the chain. Soak up that information. You can learn critical things from the most junior developers and as you could from the most senior executives.



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Being curious was critical for me when I first joined Apex.

For the outside coming in, I thought the most important thing about Apex were it's characters. Or legends as we call them. I mean it's right in the name, Apex Legends! A large diverse roster of characters, with lots of abilities that drive the flow of a Battle Royale match.

I perceived the game as hero shooter, or a BR mixed with a MOBA. I had all sorts of thoughts about how to evolve the games characters by remixing things I saw in MOBAs and Hero shooters.

But before I started pitching ideas and creating a vision, I got curious. Talked to all sorts of people from the team and asked "what do you think is the core of Apex Legends"



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And a consistent message I heard from the team is Apex is about the...

Gun skill and movement.

I was told that gun skill and movement were the core of fundamentals of Apex. That these two aspects of the game are sacred and what make Apex Apex. Not the legends, but the fundamentals of moving and shooting.

And when I stepped back and looked at the game through this lens, it made total sense. I was able to re-shape my thoughts around the core concepts of Apex's moving and shooting, and develop a much stronger vision for the game going forward.

Being curious here was critical to me having a strong start with Apex and the team.

Building the Mindset of a Leader

- Know yourself
- Become Fearless
- Lead with Vulnerability
- Be curious

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Know yourself. Know your values. Become your authentic self.

Let go of fear. Turn your fears into positive change to unlock your creative potential.

Lead with Vulnerability. You are out in front, you set the tone.

Be curious, learn from those around you. Shed light on your blind spots

Empowering the Team

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Next let's talk about the second major fundamental of Creative Direction,
Empowering the Team

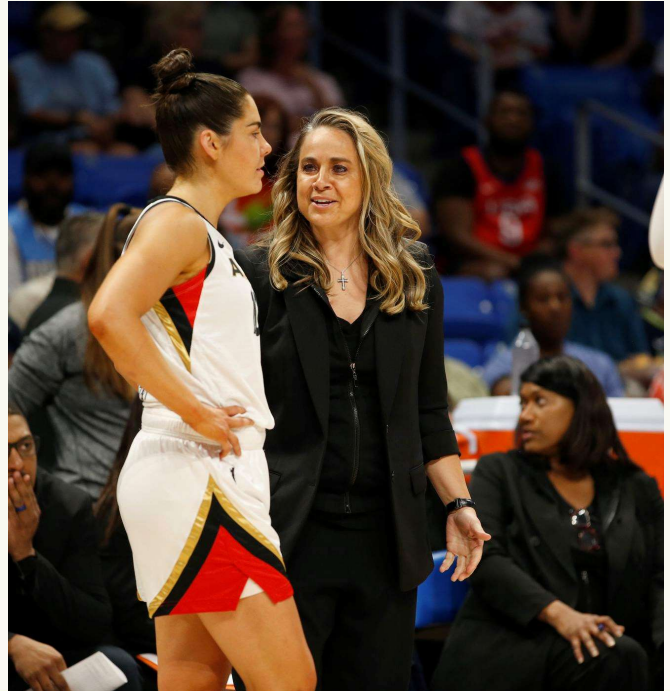


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I think a lot of people perceive a creative director in games kind of a like a movie director. And they do share some qualities, the primary one being a strong vision holder. Film directors also have this mystique of being an auteur, the source of truth for their works of art, and they alone leave a mark on their craft.

And some of that mystique is warranted. Great directors like Steven Spielberg, Kathryn Bigelow, and Jordan Peele all have distinct styles. You can feel it in the movies they direct, and if someone else had directed the movie it would have been a completely different experience.



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But I think of being a Creative Director much more like being a coach. Coaches, like movie directors establish a vision. The vision is centered around on how to win games and develop the best team.

That said, coaches do not own the execution. That's on the players. The team is made of highly talented individuals, making their own decisions on the fly during a game on how to execute on the vision and game plan.

Joe Mazzulla, Steve Kerr, and Becky Hammon all have distinct styles of coaching and it can be felt in their teams. They need to actively meld their coaching style with their players to be successful. They need to align their coaching to their players' talents and ability to execute.

Creatively directing game is similar. I am surrounded by highly talented individuals, and I do not own any of the execution. It is my job to inspire and create a vision that the team can execute against. And as they execute, they are making their own decisions on the fly for what they feel best delivers on that vision.

Empowering the Team

- Building Trust
- Team First
- Creating a Shared Vision
- Define the Problems Worth Solving

So how do we do this?

It first starts with building trust. This is the foundation for any team.

Team First. Putting the team and people on before yourself, and your own ambitions.

Then creating a shared vision with the team. This is how you get a team bought in.

Define the problems worth solving. Drive focus and execute the things that you and the team believe matter.

Building Trust

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Building Trust. Trust is foundational to all relationships. To have a strong healthy team, strong bonds of trust must be formed.



Creative Director

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Design Director

^

Design Lead

^

Senior Designer

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Designer



Senior Design Director

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I spent over 9 years at Bungie. I initially came in as a mid level designer, and then about ever 1-2 years I moved up in responsibility.

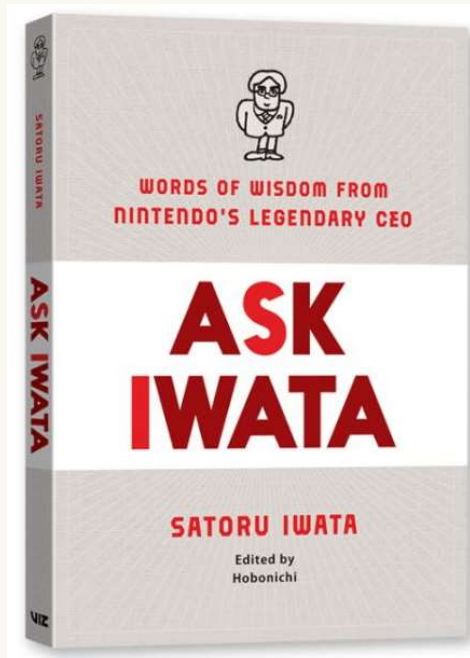
Over that time, I built a lot of trust organically. The sheer fact I had been around longer than others gave me built in trust, and each step of the way I gained bit more trust and responsibility.

And then I switched studios. I moved into a high-level role, with NONE of the trust built up. I was expected to lead a large team and direct the entirety of the design of Apex Legends. On Destiny, my focus the seasonal experiences alone. This felt like a much larger responsibility.

I was excited to join Respawn and the Apex team, but I was nervous. I had no history, no relationship with the team, and expectations were high for me.

I knew I had to earn the team's trust, but I was struggling with how I was going to do it.

And by pure luck during my break as I transitioned from Bungie to Respawn I read "Ask Iwata".



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I learned Iwata had the ritual of “interviewing” everyone of his employees when he was at HAL Laboratory twice a year. Iwata genuinely wanted to learn what was going on in their lives. Learn what motivates them, what problems they are seeing. Reveal his blindspots. He showed genuine curiosity in his employees. In turn he built stronger bonds of trust, and a stronger team overall.

I took this lesson from Iwata and once I started at Respawn, I focused on setting up 1-on-1s with various people across the Apex team. I spoke with designers, artists, animators, engineers, writers, QA, producers, execs, and probably forgot some unfortunately. I spoke to people from every level, and worked to get a holistic view of what was happening on Apex. I learned so much in the process, correcting assumptions and revealing blind spots.

Most importantly, I was earning people’s trust. It people’s put minds at ease that I wasn’t here to flip the table. I showed I genuinely cared about them, their perspective, and our shared success.

Building Trust

- Be authentic, be vulnerable, and be curious
- Genuinely Know People
- Listen with Intent
- Continuous Dialogue

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The first step in building trust is to be authentic, be vulnerable, and be curious. This is why doing the work to build the mindset is so important.

Genuinely know people. Actively put the effort to know the people on your team. Get to know them as whole people, not just what they do for work. What do they care about? What are their passions? Hobbies? What gets them excited about their craft?

Listen with intent. Ask curious questions, and just listen. Don't try to solve anything. Stay curious and focus on listening.

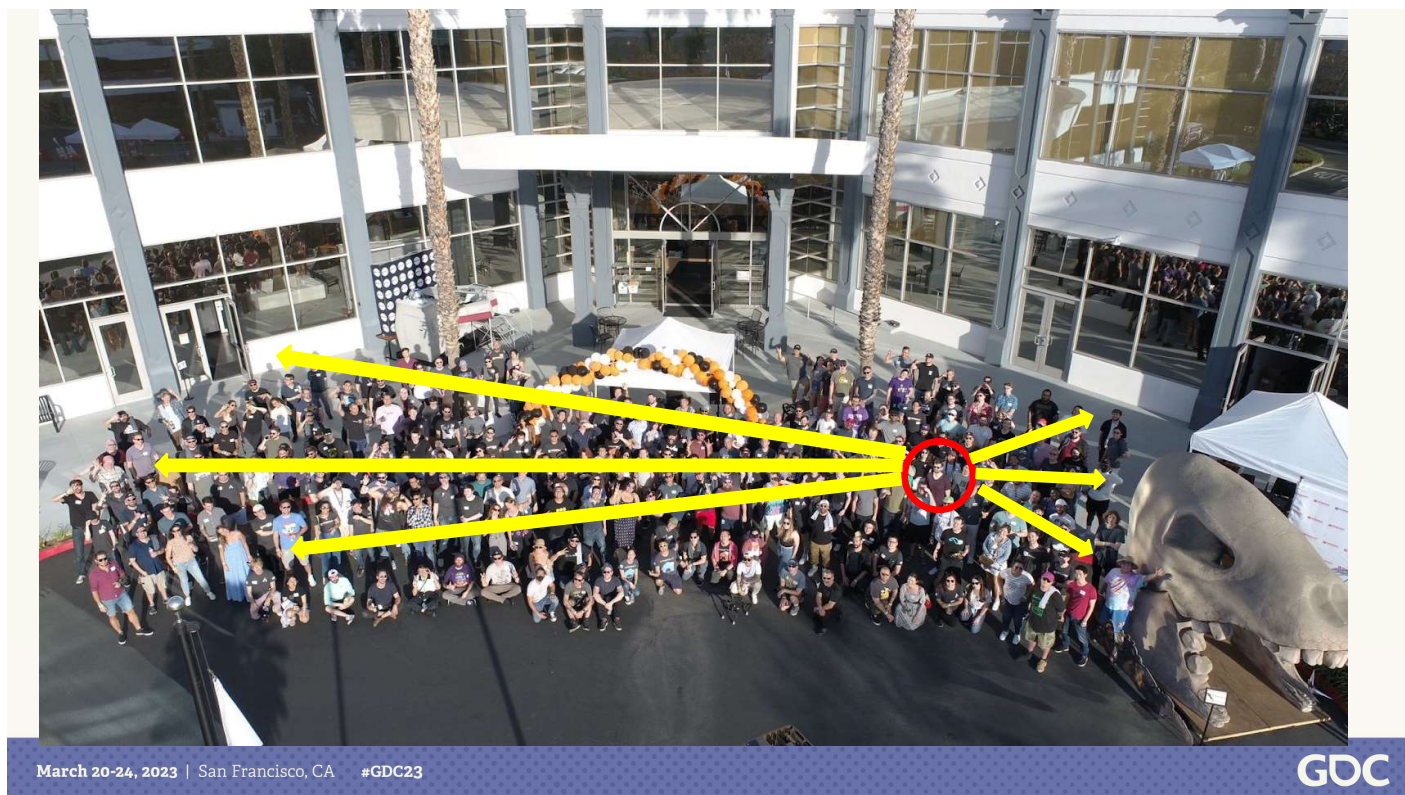
This is a continuous process and open dialogue. It's not about just checking the box. You need to tend to trust constantly.

Team First

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Next let's discuss building a team first mentality.



This is a photo from the Respawn welcome back party in LA. Not everyone in this photo is on Apex, but I hope you get the idea.

I am right here. I am just one part of a large team, but I know I have significant impact on the success of the team. Every decision I make impacts everyone on the team.

My focus is on making the team the best possible version of themselves. Enabling them to do their creative work to make Apex the best competitive game on the market.

Team First

- Team's success is your success
- People first, game second
- Celebrate everyday wins
- Culture is the keystone

The team's success is your success. It is no longer about you, it's about how successful your team is. Focus on making THEM successful.

Focus on people first, and the content of the game second. It is critical to build people up and set them up for success. If you can get people to believe in themselves and feel confident that leadership has their back, they are much more likely to create a great game.

Celebrate everyday wins. As a Creative Director it can take months until you see a goal you set achieved. If you focus only on the big goals, it will be a long time until you feel a win. You need to be mindful and celebrate the wins you see everyday. It's good for you and the team around you. Things like good playtest is a win! Embrace it!

Culture is the keystone. Culture informs the way you work and how you engage with each other. Focus on developing a healthy culture around vulnerability. Around handling failure.

Around constructive debate. The team will be more resilient to multiple challenging iterations to the game that are inevitably going to happen.



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I was a design lead on the Forsaken expansion's early days. I was excited to lead, but my skills were definitely raw. I had a vision of what I wanted to see through. I wanted to do things MY way. I believed I knew what was best for Destiny.

It did not go well. I was too brash, too demanding, and too controlling. Feedback got back to me that a few people did not want to work with me. It was tough feedback to hear, but it was true. I was lucky to have an excellent project manager and career manager that helped me handle the feedback and worked on coaching me.

I needed to let go. I needed to focus on the people and what drives them, not my own personal ambition. The game design will come, focus on the people.

Thankfully I got another chance. The project manager helped me reset and put me on the Warmind expansion. I took a much different approach this time. Heeding my mentors' advice, I worked to get to know the team and what they wanted to see for Destiny. It was a continuous conversation, and my focus was guiding the team. I worked to match the team's talents and ambitions to what Destiny needed at the time.

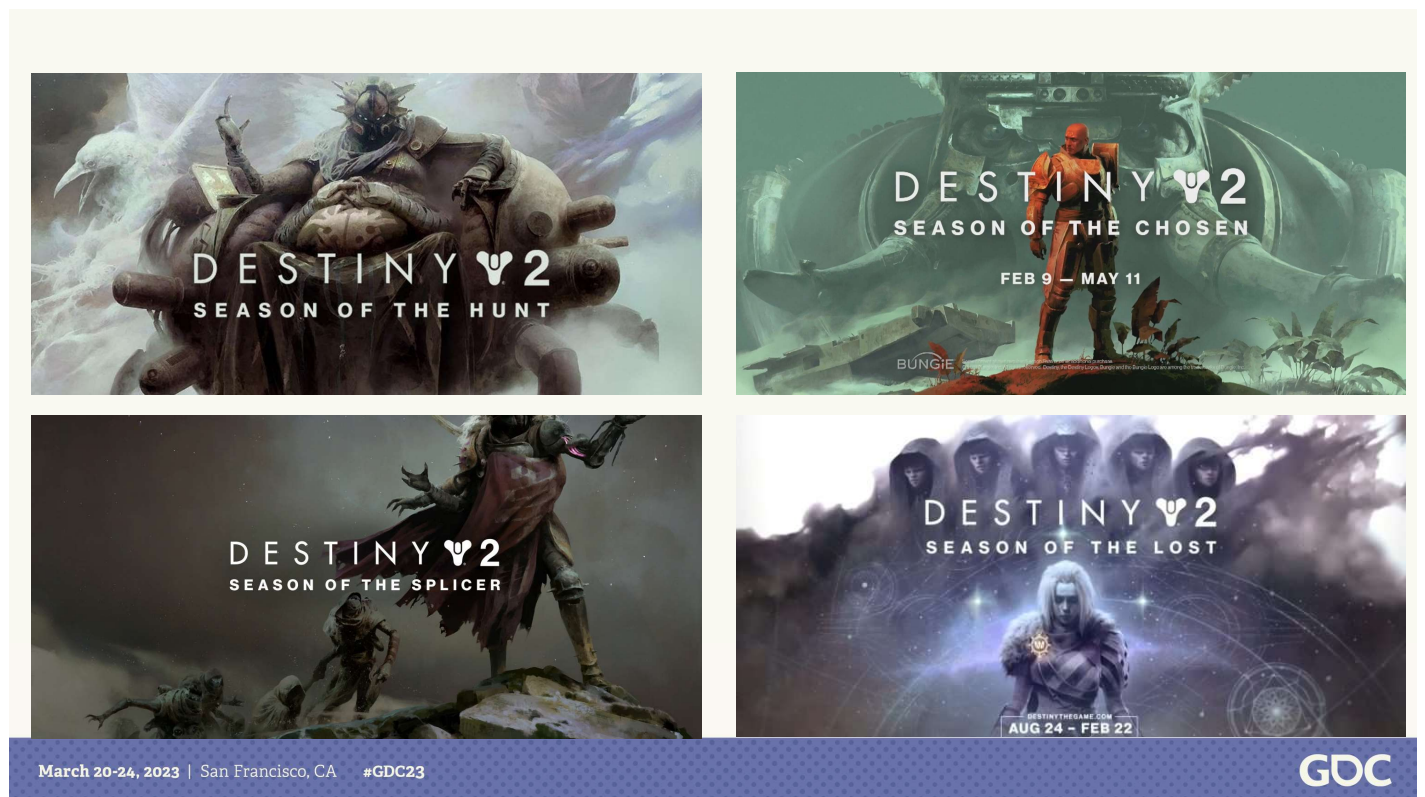
War mind is where I felt like I was getting my leadership legs underneath me. Was it 100% smooth sailing, no. But I was learning and the team I was working with was great at teaching me how to grow.

Creating a Shared Vision

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Let's talk about creating a shared vision



This is the last year of Destiny 2 that I directed. This year spanned from November 2020 to February 2022. However, I started working on road mapping this out back in January of 2020.

I initially put it all on myself to do this work. And I struggled for over 2 weeks. Between handling several live game issues and my own creative insecurities, I was making little to no headway.

I expressed my frustration to my Art Director partner at the time. I felt I was letting people down. His response was "let us help you." So, we got the leads from design, art, narrative, and even production and started road mapping this year out.

It was an amazing experience for me. Instead of racking my brain to try to come up with THE solve, I was working with a bunch of highly talented people. It took a ton of pressure off me and I felt like I could direct the team to a good creative solution. Most important of all, they became owners in the visions and champions of it.

Creating a Shared Vision

- Leverage the power of the team
- It's the team's vision
- Be clear when the vision is set
- Be ready to evolve the vision

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Leverage the power of your team. You're surrounded with talented individuals, ask for help. Your job is not to have THE idea, it's to guide the team to great creative vision you ALL believe in.

It's the team's vision. It's not YOUR vision alone. You want the team have ownership. This increases accountability and they become evangelists for the vision. There is nothing more powerful when everyone is speaking the same language about the vision.

Be clear when the vision is set. Your job at as the director is to call the shot and state "this is the vision." Then get the team to drive to action.

Be ready to evolve the vision. A vision sounds great on paper, but it's truly tested once it's the build. Be open to evolving and growing the vision as you learn things about your game. Leverage the talents of the team to help you evolve that vision.

Define the Problems Worth Solving

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To help guide the creation of building that shared vision, it starts with defining the problems worth solving.

It can be easy to focus on sizzle and hype when building a vision. It is what catches the eye!

The real impactful work, though, is finding the tough problems and solving them.

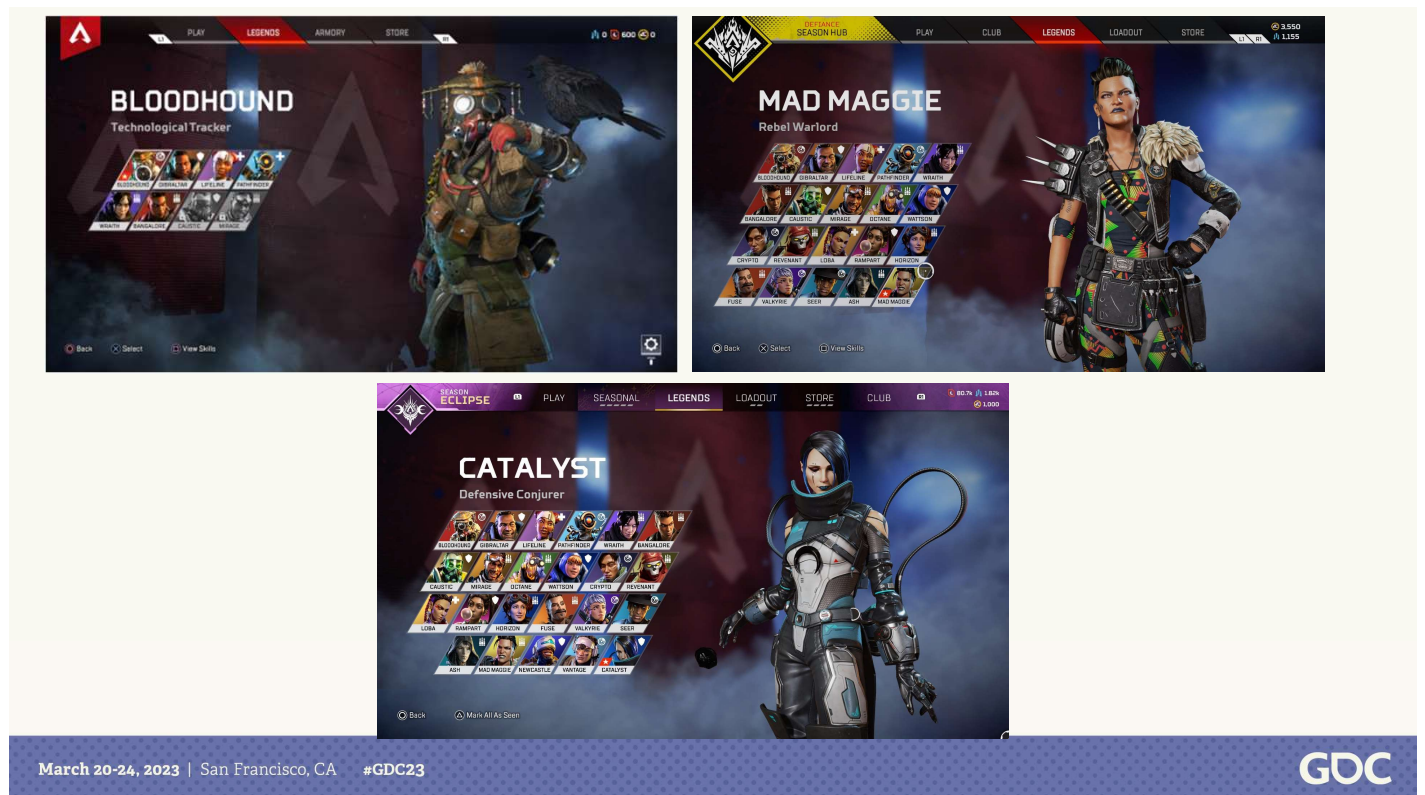


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A good example of this is how we tackled the most recent season of Apex, Revelry.

This season was the first season we did not launch a new character and instead invested in our existing roster of characters.



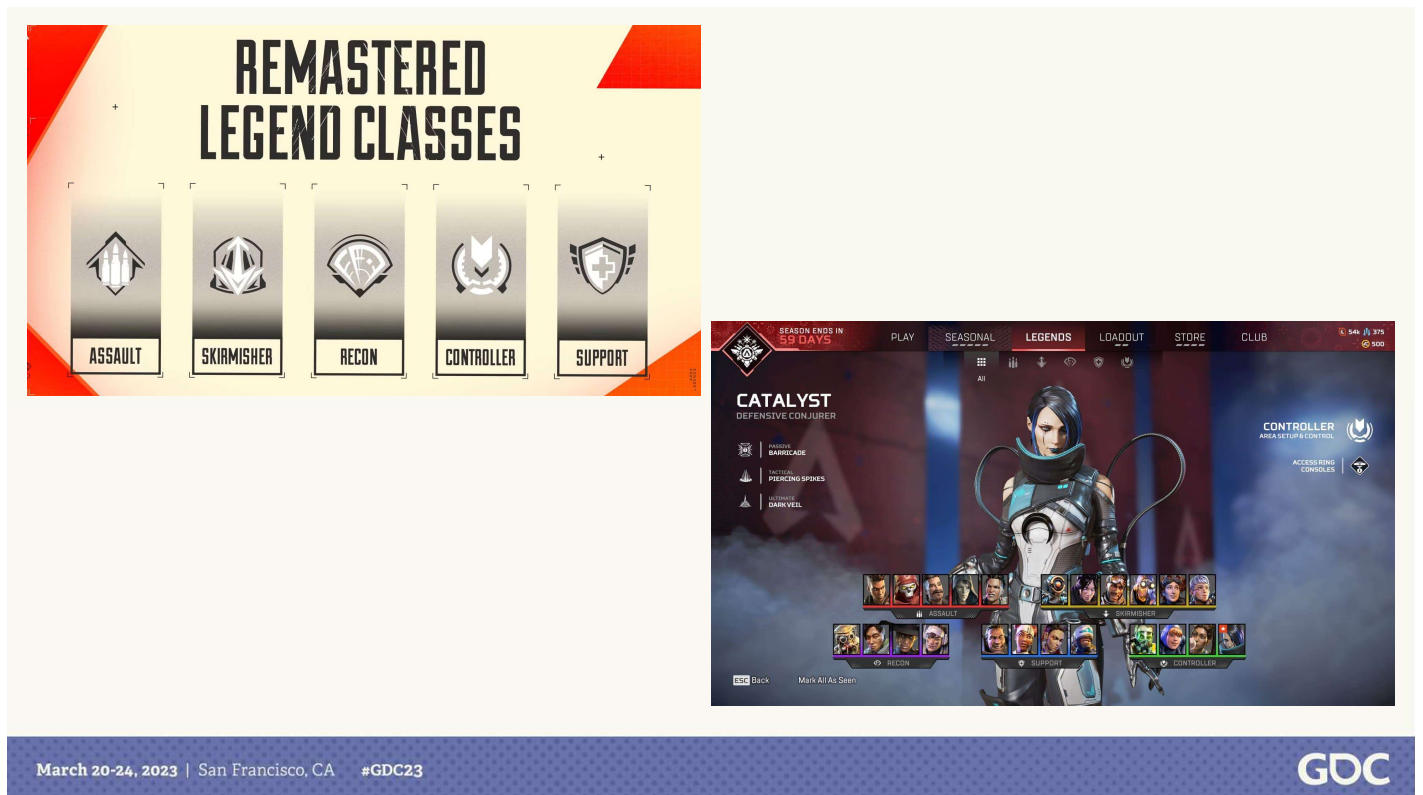
When Apex first launched it start with 8 characters. Even with such a small roster, the game felt incredible.

By the time I joined, Apex was on the cusp of delivering its 20th character with Mad Maggie. In addition, 3 more characters were in development and would be launched over the next 3 seasons. This would be bring the roster to 23!

The thing is, with each character release, it was becoming less and less impactful to release a character. The game was also building debt with its existing character roster. It was starting to feel stale.

I told the team that I thought we should address the existing roster. I think there are powerful opportunities there to re-invigorate the game. I was told we "We can't, we don't have time. We have to keep shipping characters."

I then asked "What if we didn't have to ship a character. What if I had the time to solely focus the existing roster? What would you do?"



And this is how remastered legend classes came about. Our character classes had existed since launch, but didn't really mean anything. We wanted to the classes mean something and feel impactful.

To focus the pitches, we defined clear goals and constraints.

- Impact all the characters. Not a single legend could be left untouched. This needs to feel as important if not more important than a new character.
- New ways for players to approach the characters they know and love. Developing new compelling strategies and tactics.
- Build a strong foundation for future characters, and the competitive longevity of the game.

And we had to work with in our constraints. Our people, our time, and technology. We had many other great ideas, but wouldn't have fit within our constraints as the time.

The team executed excellently against this vision, and really shook up the game. We have had great engagement this season and have set ourselves up for a stronger future.

Define the Problems Worth Solving

- Define the root of the problem
- Define the goals and constraints
- Get agreement
- Execution is on the team

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Start by finding the root of the problem. Our initial impressions are typically surface level and observations of symptoms of a deeper problem. Work with the team to find the root of the problem. The problem that when addressed will solve the symptoms you are observing.

Define the goals and constraints to the solution, and answer why this problem is worth solving. How can this problem be solved given the current physical constraints of our technology and team.

Get agreement between you and those you who are doing the work to solve this problem. People need to be bought if they are going to their best work.

Execution is on the team. Your job is to crisply define the problem, and then it's time for you to let go and let the team execute a solve.

Empowering the Team

- Building Trust
- Team First
- Create a Shared Vision
- Define the Problems Worth Solving

It starts with building trust. It's foundational to all things.

Put the team first. It's no longer about your ambitions, it's about the team.

Create a shared vision that everyone buys into

Define the problems with solving to create that shared vision

Honest and Direct Communication

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Let's cover the last major area of the Skill of Creative Direction, Honest and Direct communication.

Being able to communicate in an honest and direct manner is critical in being an effective Creative Director.

Honest and Direct Communication

- Engage Early and Often
- Be Clear and Have Empathy
- Welcome Disagreement
- Consistent Messaging and Repetition

Engage Early and Often. Engage in your team's creative processes early and be in contact in often. Give the team confidence that you are present.

Be clear and have empathy. Be clear and direct in your communication, but you need to recognize the emotion in critiquing creativity. You need to have empathy.

Welcome disagreement. You want your views and direction to be challenged. To strengthen your vision, rely on others to push you to sharpen that vision.

Consistent messaging and repetition. When you have established a vision and direction, be consistent it what you are saying. Get comfortable with repeating that message over and over again.

Engage Early and Often

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You want to engage early with people in the creative process and establish a constant open dialogue. You want to give the team confidence you are engaged and provide them visibility into your thought process.

To engage early and often effectively, you need to build rituals to enable this. Which means... MEETINGS!



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In Person. Over Zoom. Or my personal favorite coffee chats.

I know, meetings can be draining.

A core part of your job, is to **COMMUNICATE**. You have to communicate vision, direction, and feedback constantly. This information is best relayed through nuanced conversation and debate with other people in real time.

DO NOT try to rely on text only. There is nothing worse to get an email dropped you that has direction and feedback with no discussion.



You maybe picturing a calendar like this.

BUT, this does NOT have to be meeting hell! Establish consistent rituals to avoid ad hoc randomizing meetings.

My calendar is busy with rituals, but nothing is a surprise. Everyone knows the cadence and I know that every week I have AT LEAST one touch point with all of the design leads on my team.

Good Meetings

- Consistent and predictable
- Clear Purpose
- End with Action

Consistent and predictable. You are building rituals. You want a predictable cadence that covers all your responsibilities.

Clear Purpose. Make sure all your meetings have clear targeted purpose. If meetings are lacking purpose or clear agenda, remove them.

Lastly make sure your meetings end with action. Having a meeting where you talk and discuss but leave with no clear steps forward is a wasted meeting.

Key Rituals

- 1-on-1s
- Playtesting, Review, and Feedback
- Strategy and Tactics

The key rituals you should establish in priority order are.

1-on-1s. These are your most important meetings. This where you connect with people and build trust. You must make time for these, particularly if you're managing some one's career.

Playtesting, Review, and Feedback sessions. This is the core loop of your job. Make time to play the game, ideally everyday. Capture your feedback and direction. Deliver it to the relevant teams.

Strategy and Tactics. Where you work to lay out long term initiatives and work with relevant teams on how to execute those initiatives.

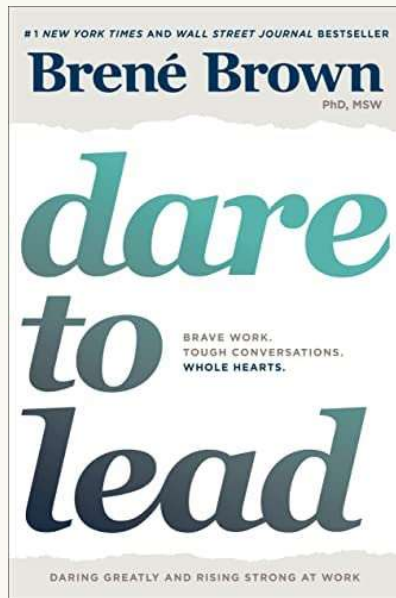
If you break your schedule down and focus on these types of meetings, you should have all your responsibilities covered. If you still find yourself over booked, you are a bottle neck or potentially micro managing. Seek ways to delegate and reduce dependency on yourself.

Be Clear and Have Empathy

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And in these in these rituals it is vital to be clear and have empathy in your communication.



“Clear is Kind.

Unclear is Unkind.”

- Brené Brown

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To quote Brené Brown again, Clear is Kind. Unclear is Unkind.

Be clear and direct in your communication. It can be tough to give direct feedback. There is a natural desire to avoid conflict, to protect someone.

It is better to be clear in your communication, though. You may think you are protecting people by softening your communication, but it hurts trust. Lack of clarity will cause confusion.

Clarity will get to results sooner and at higher quality.

Now when I say be clear, I don't mean to be a jerk. Saying things like "This weapon is terrible," or "This character is lame" is helpful to NO ONE!

We have to remember when most people create something and share it, they are being vulnerable. They put a piece of themselves into that work.

“This weapon is terrible”

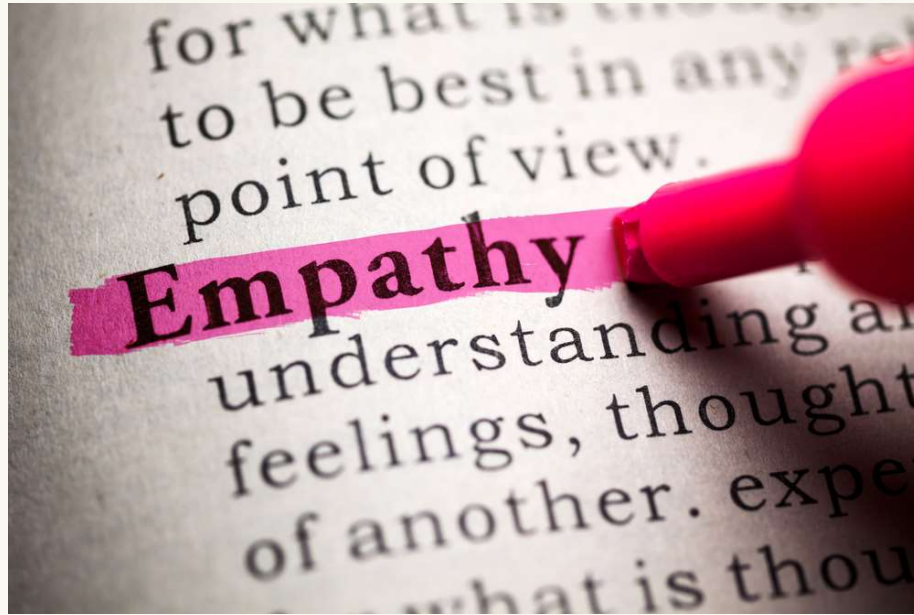


“You are terrible”

So when you say “This weapon is terrible...”

What you are effectively saying to that person is “You are terrible.”

This why we need to have empathy in our communication.



We must recognize and acknowledge the emotion in the conversations we have.

I don't buy into "have a thick skin" or "that's just part of the job, suck it up"

Feedback can cut. Even for myself who has been doing this for years. When I get some critical feedback it hurts. I may be better at handling it, because I have been through it, but that doesn't mean it cuts a bit.

When we share creative work, we are vulnerable. This is why it is so important to build trust. We want to know when we share our creative work, when we share ourselves, will be safe. The critique will come, but it's coming from a place that wants to improve the work and in turn improve us.

It's great to get hands on with this new weapon so early.

It is feeling underpowered right now. The rate of fire feels slower than I expected.

What are the current goals? What is the experience are we aiming for?

Let's reframe the weapon example.

"It's great to get hands on with this new weapon so early."

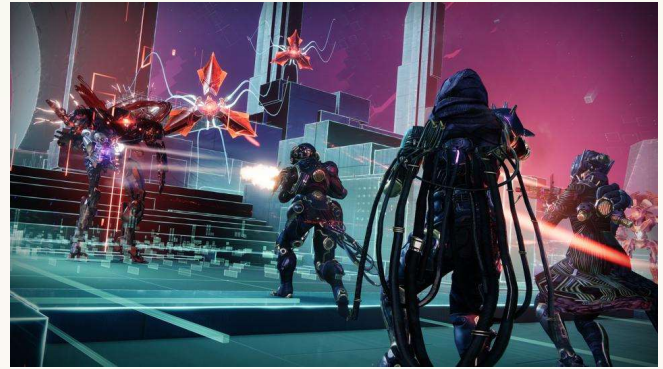
- Show appreciation that the creator is putting themselves out there. That it is good to get early on eyes on this work.

"It is feeling underpowered right now. The rate of fire feels slower than I expected."

- State your feedback, articulate WHY you feel the way your do

"What are the current goals? What is the experience are we aiming for?"

- Open the door for conversation. Work to understand the intended experience. Maybe the slow rate of fire is intended, but something about the presentation of the weapon is throwing that expectation off.
- Lastly be clear that it's not on the creator themselves, but WE together are going to solve it.



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Now I want to talk to an example where this all came together.

This screen shot is from Destiny 2's override activity. This is the finished result, but in the early days of the activity it was rough. And not just rough, in place holder assets and poor balance, it was a confusing and complex experience.

So I met with the design owner later about it 1-on-1 and had a direct conversation. I opened with "That playtest was a bit rough, yea?"

And he agreed, and a bit embarrassed.

But then I followed up with "Let's walk through this together and talk about what you're trying to achieve in this experiences. I know we can make this great."

We had a great back and forth, explaining his thought process. He wanted to evoke the feeling of hacking a computer network that you physically dove into. We started to define the problems around the current implementation, had drove focus by cutting away mechanics that were

distracting from the core. We had our disagreements through out the conversation, but we ended at a set of actions to take next that we committed too. The next iteration was much improved.

I will never forget what he said me after that conversation. It was "Evan you really know what you want. I really appreciate we could just talk and figure this out together."

That made my day. It felt like I was doing good work.

Be Clear and Have Empathy

- Be clear, be direct
- Clarity in direction vs feedback
- Recognize the emotion
- We're a team

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Be clear, be direct in your communication. Lean into conflict sooner rather than later. This is where having high trust is so important.

Clarity in direction vs feedback. Be clear on what is direction. What HAS to be executed. Be clear on what is feedback. What is a suggestion, but not something that is make or break for you.

Recognize the emotion in the conversation. Have empathy for the other person that is receiving your feedback or direction. Recognize that they are human and they being vulnerable when they are sharing their creative work.

We're a team, we are going to work together. The person receiving the direction and feedback is not isolated on their own. You will work together to find a path forward.

Welcome Disagreement

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Welcome disagreement. You want to foster good, healthy, and constructive debate.

The word disagreement can get a bad rep. And I can understand why.



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I think this image evokes an intense disagreement you have had. It can mean fighting and lack of progress. Just pure frustration. You can tell this leader here has just had it.

But disagreement can also look like this. A conversation. This is a leader here that is in control of the conversation. Disagreement can spark creative solutions and lead to progress if harnessed correctly.



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I recently actually got into an exchange with my team over support characters in our game.

The design team and I were discussing new support prototypes and I was driving the direction of gun skill and movement first. That we don't have space for pure supports like you would see in a MOBA like League of Legends or a Hero Shooter like Overwatch.

And I received push back almost immediately. WHICH IS GOOD! It meant we have a high trust environment. People can speak up!

The lead character designer argued hard that there is space for a more pure support character, and a few others jumped in arguing along the same lines. I got curious and started asking more questions. We as a team started to align where there was opportunity for supports in Apex.

Now I won't reveal where we landed, we are still prototyping and testing our assumptions. But we ended with action and a committed direction on new things to innovate the support character space.

Welcome Disagreement

- Ask to be challenged
- It's a conversation
- Keep it about the work
- Disagree and commit

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Ask to be challenged. This is where being vulnerable is important. You set the tone and tenor, that this is part of the process. Build a culture where your vision and views are challenged. This will strengthen your direction and feedback.

It's a conversation. This is not a combative and competitive debate. You want ideas going back and forth, generating positive momentum. Work to listen to people, and make sure people feel heard.

Keep it about the work. Bring the focus to the problems trying to be solved and the work to be done. If things get personal, if tension starts to rise, step back and reset. Do not erode trust by challenging people who they are.

Disagree and commit. Complete consensus is out of the norm. It's your job as the director to find the common ground, balance what's best for the game, and commit to a direction. Not everyone will agree, but make sure people are committed to executing the direction. You can't afford to have people dragging their feet.

Consistent Messaging and Repetition

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You speak to the vision, your direction, and your feedback you need to be consistent in the message you deliver.

And...

You will repeat yourself

Again...

Again...

AGAIN!

Where I have had to apply repeated consistent messaging is with the phrase "Design for Impact"

Design for Impact



It started back in June of 2022 coming off of Ranked Reloaded. Ranked Reload was divisive, but also a purposeful turning point to bring meaningful impact to Apex. Thing is I did not do a good job explaining why this philosophy mattered to me and the future of Apex.

Design for Impact



4 Presentations



30+ Feedback sessions



100+ meetings

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I delivered the mantra “Design for Impact”

4 Team wide presentations

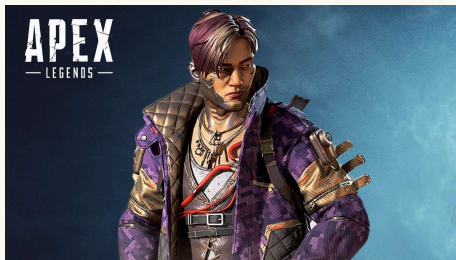
30+ Feedback sessions

Literally 100+ meetings. 1-on-1s, strategy sessions, spec review, etc

All talking about design for impact and why it mattered.

And in the most recent season, we are starting to see this philosophy to really gel.

Design for Impact



Crypto pick rate skyrockets in Apex Legends after Season 16 update

Alex Garton | Published: Feb 20, 2023, 06:04 | Updated: Feb 20, 2023, 06:04



High-rank Apex Legends players have a new favorite Legend in Season 16

Alex Garton | Published: Mar 01, 2023, 06:14 | Updated: Mar 01, 2023, 06:14

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Having people trying different legends. Getting them off their mains.

Developing new strategies and ways of playing.

Design for Impact



Apex Legends Players Want Respawn to Nerf Season 16's New Nemesis Gun

After having time to check out Season 16 of Apex Legends, some fans think the Nemesis Burst AR, the newest weapon for the game, needs a nerf.

BY TYLER SHIPLEY | PUBLISHED FEB 18, 2023



ImperialHal reveals must-use weapon to dominate Apex Legends Season 16

Alex Garton | Published: Feb 17, 2023, 01:32 | Updated: Feb 17, 2023, 01:32

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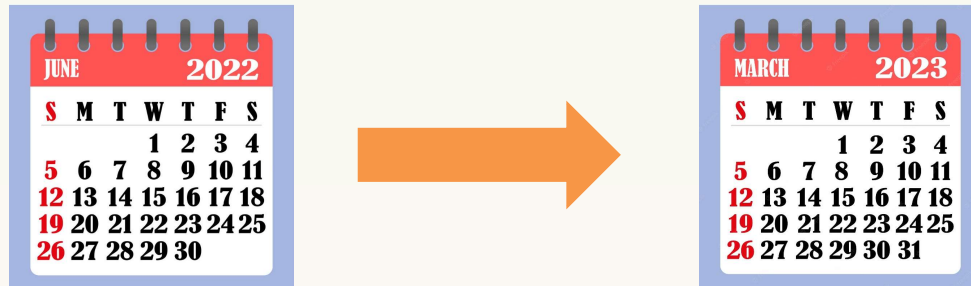
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The nemesis came in hot and divisive. Out of the gate already demanding a nerf! Which is great, we want to knock people off their old stand bys.

An SMG in the R99 that fell by the wayside is getting new appreciation.

Change can really be felt throughout the game.

Design for Impact



9 MONTHS!

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So starting back in June of 2022 I have been repeating the mantra "Design for Impact." Just a couple weeks ago, March now, I gave the direction to again "design for impact" with some features coming out in the next season.

It's been 9 months of repeating the same message! And that's okay! That's part of the job! It's important to repeat a consistent message and direction.

And it is sinking in. People use it when looking at their work and giving feedback on the other they see.

I had a great moment in a playtest last week where we were playtesting some new character prototypes. I heard someone say, "Yo, this new legend is definitely designed for impact."

And I just smiled.

Consistent Messaging and Repetition

- Be consistent in your direction
- Repetition is necessary
- Broadcast change immediately
- Repeat again

You need to be consistent in your direction. Find a strong message and stick to it. If it is not sticking, keep working on it until something does.

Repetition is necessary. You have to stick with your message and keep repeating yourself. Do not get frustrated, it is part of the process.

When change does occur, and it will, broadcast it immediately.

And repeat again, and again, and again.

Honest and Direct Communication

- Engage Early and Often
- Be Clear and Have Empathy
- Welcome Disagreement
- Consistent Messaging and Repetition

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Engage Early and Often. Create rituals to engage in your team's various creative processes as early, and be in contact in often.

Be clear and have empathy. Be clear and direct in your communication. Have empathy and recognize the emotion in your conversations.

Welcome disagreement. To strengthen your vision, rely on others to challenge you to sharpen that vision.

Consistent messaging and repetition. Be consistent in what you are saying. Get comfortable with repeating that message over and over again.

Closing Thoughts

- The Leadership mindset comes first
- Trust is the foundation
- Empowerment is your primary job
- Honest and direct communication is key
- Find mentors and sponsors
- It is a process

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The leadership mindset comes first. Focus on getting know yourself and becoming an authentic leader.

Trust is the foundation. I have talked a lot about trust in this talk and it's because everything stems from it. For team to be healthy and make a great game, trust needs to be there.

Empowerment is your primary job. Focus on setting your team up for success and they will help you deliver a great game.

Honest and direct communication is key. You need to be direct and lean into challenging conversations. It is how progress is made and memorable game is created.

Find mentors and sponsors. Have mentors that can provide critical feedback and guidance. Have sponsors that champion for you when you're not there.

Lastly, it is a process. A lot of the concepts we discussed today are easy to understand but difficult to execute. It will take time learn and a lot of

practice. I am still practicing and working to improve everyday.

Because remember...

Creative direction is a skill

You can learn it

You can be taught it

Practice it consistently

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Creative direction is a skill

You can learn it

You can be taught it

And if you practice it consistently...

I know you can become a great creative director too.

Thank you!



@EvanNikolich



linkedin.com/in/evan-nikolich

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Thank you!

Feel free to follow me on Twitter or connect with me on LinkedIn.

And If my leadership style sounds interesting to you, we are hiring!

Happy answer any questions with the time we have left.