

The  
Emotional  
Leadership  
Podcast

EPISODE 1

# Excitement + Choosing Ambitious Goals

*with Jean Hsu*

## FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

### **Emily**

Welcome to Emotional Leadership, the podcast for high achieving leaders. Because healthier emotional lives means stronger leadership, thriving teams and much bigger results.

We are here! Episode One, my manager friends, and I could not be more excited. Which is great because today we're talking about excitement. Specifically, we're talking about how we avoid excitement when we hold back on setting big interesting goals that challenge us and let us play in our Zone of Genius. So many of us get frustrated at work. We're getting rave reviews from the folks around us--but we know we're capable of so much more and we're just not getting there. We don't have the time. We moved to a new team and feel like we're starting over from zero. That promotion just isn't happening like we want it to. Whatever it is, you have dreams and they feel both so close and so very far at the same time.

Well, my friends, I made this podcast just for you. Not this episode. An entire podcast dedicated to bringing you the tools you need to become the manager of your dreams. The manager who takes on big challenges and creates huge impact. The manager who builds thriving teams and the manager who doesn't do it at the expense of her own time, sanity or health. Yup. We're doing more with less stress and I can actually follow through on that promise. Ready to dive in? I thought so.

So--here's the deal. There are exactly three steps to accomplishing big wins. Create a clear vision, stop distracting yourself, and plan and take massive action. If you're ever not getting done what you want to get done, it's because you're not doing one of those three things. And I can tell you right up front that the biggest reason we distract ourselves or don't plan and take massive action is that we're afraid of how taking big steps towards big goals feels. It's uncomfortable, it's terrifying. It makes you want to throw up.

And it triggers our primitive brain to feed us all sorts of BS in an attempt to try to keep us safe. So we take little steps towards little goals, but we never really get where we're aiming because we are capable of so much more. You are capable of so much more.

So I know little steps towards little goals isn't really enough for you. Why? Because it wasn't enough for me, so I taught myself how to take on big goals and how to show up and make them happen. You're going to do the same. But this means you've got to stop running away from your emotions at work. And now you've got your secret weapon, a podcast dedicated to showing you exactly how. So let's start with step one, creating clear vision. To help us with this, I've got Jean Hsu joining me this week. She's helped hundreds of leaders set big goals and show up for bigger results than they thought they were capable of. We're going to talk about excitement and how to harness yours to create a vision that's perfect for you. But the end of this episode, you're going to know what your first big win will be and you're going to have everything you need to create a clear vision for it this week.

### **Begin Interview**

#### **Emily**

Good morning! I am so excited to be here with Jean Hsu. Jean, tell us a little bit, who are you?

#### **Jean**

I spent about a decade in the tech industry and various companies, starting at Google and then made my way to Android development at Pulse. And then I left Pulse to join The Obvious Corporation, which became Medium-- starting off as a kind of a mid level ISC and then made my way into management, tech leadership, and was there for about five and a half years. About three years ago I left to coach engineering leaders. I saw that there was a gap of people transitioning from engineering to engineering leadership and I really wanted to serve that gap. And that morphed into co-founding a company called Co-Leadership, which runs work shops and online courses. Basically we do leadership development that's targeted towards engineers transitioning into leadership.

#### **Emily**

Thanks. And what do you love about management and leadership?

#### **Jean**

I really love the people side of things. I think it can be hard to switch from the more immediate feedback that writing code provides to working more with people, coaching them, mentoring them. But I also really love that, because it is kind of unpredictable in a way. Like, you could have a conversation with someone in a one-on-one and or just manage someone for a period of time, and then years later hear that it was really impactful on their career. And you said this one thing in a one-on-one that changed how they saw

themselves--that level of impact I feel like is what I really loved the most.

**Emily**

Yeah. I find that one of the most important things we can do as managers is help our people pay attention to how they're thinking and build thought patterns that work really well for them.

**Jean**

Yeah, definitely.

**Emily**

So today we're talking about excitement and we're talking about choosing big goals and setting clear vision and why folks choose NOT to do those things at work. All the little projects that we don't take on, the little improvements throughout our teams and our companies and the ways that we can step up and really be operating at the next level when we take on those systemic issues. But that we either don't see them or we opt not to take them on right now. So what do you find are some of the biggest reasons why the folks you work with aren't taking on big goals and big projects?

**Jean**

Yeah, I think for first line managers, like new-ish managers, you know, with up to 10 or 15 reports, but they're not managing managers--it can be really easy to see opportunities at the company for a new system to be put in place or something that's kind of outside their immediate direct responsibilities of like managing their team. And I think a lot of times there's this feeling of like someone else will do it or the next level up should be taking care of it, right? So that's kind of a big gap where a lot of things are not being taken care of, where they're not being picked up and people are not taking initiative.

**Emily**

What are the mindsets you'd encourage people to take instead of, Oh, my managers should be doing this, why aren't they? That's really annoying.

**Jean**

Yeah. I think a useful exercise is to put yourself in your manager's shoes and just sort of take a moment to think about, what are all the things that are on your manager's plate? Cause it could be that the thing that you're worried about is one of like 50 things your manager knows is important, but they only have the bandwidth to take on maybe five personally. And so because they're not taking it on doesn't mean it's not important, right? And so if you come to them with a plan and say, Hey, this thing is really important, here's how I want to tackle it and here's how much time I need, here's the resources I need. I think most people don't do that because they think if it were important, the manager would already be taking action

towards it. But they don't see that if you come to them with a plan, then you're effectively leveraging your manager's time and just having them be able to sign off on it and say, okay, that sounds good, like an incredible plan, go ahead and do it.

**Emily**

Yeah, I think so often one of the reasons we shut off excitement at work is that's not my job, I'm not allowed to do it.

**Jean**

Right. Right. And in really small startups when there are, you know, five people, it's more clear that you can do sort of whatever, right. You kind of have to jump in and just do whatever's needed in the moment. When the company grows to say 30 or 40 people, you start to hire people into specific roles, you start to create some clarity around the roles that exist. Then I think that that mindset sort of starts to appear. And I noticed this when I joined Obvious, I had just come from a very small startup. You know, the employees were mostly straight out of school, like undergrad or grad school. And so I definitely felt like I could just do whatever. There weren't a lot of people more qualified than me at the company. And so creating a hiring process or onboarding, all these things, I was like, well, I'll just jump in and do it and kind of take an initial stab at it and see how it goes. And it worked out really well. When I joined Obvious, because there were so many people that I felt like were more experienced than I was. I found myself shying away from those from those opportunities, because I felt like there's someone who's more equipped to do these things. And later I realized that's true that people had more experience, but I still had a lot to contribute. And when I had really the enthusiasm to do it, I should have probably captured that and gone ahead and taken initiative.

**Emily**

So talking about the idea of being in a smaller group where it's easier for folks to think, Hey, I'm excited about this, I should just pick it up. One of the things you mentioned is that moving to a larger environment, sometimes we think, Oh, that's someone else's job. But sometimes we also think, there's someone more qualified than me, I probably shouldn't be the person who does it. What other traps do you see people fall into where they have this excitement over a project and then they shut it down? And really they shut it down themselves instead of someone else saying, you shouldn't pick this up.

**Jean**

Right. I think in another trap that I've seen is, someone else has taken a step. Somebody has looked into it, they've written something up and now it feels like that that person has claimed that territory and to insert yourself into it would be seen as stepping on their toes.

**Emily**

Yes. Sometimes I see leaders do the opposite pattern themselves. They start thinking about a lot of projects. You maybe talk about each one with or two people and then it feels like you have all of these things up in the air and now it's overwhelming to follow through on them. How do you help people sort through which things to pursue?

**Jean**

Sometimes there will be a clear priority in terms of what the team needs. So, you know, if you have a bunch of interns starting in the summer and you don't have any sort of on-boarding or plan for them, then coming up with that, it's probably a higher priority than something else that's sort of more of a feels like a pet project. But I would say looking at what the team needs and what people want to do and where their strengths are. So looking at that sweet spot, looking at for that intersection would be a good place to start. Because there are things that are maybe slightly more important, but if no one really wants to work on it and there's something that's, by whatever measure, slightly less important, but you have someone who's really enthusiastic to take it on, you're going to get better results letting them run with that.

**Emily**

Yes. I know sometimes when we talk about constraint theory, we bring in the idea that if you're not working on THE bottleneck, it's not valuable, right? I think that might make sense when there's ONE water pipe that flows between your house and the city water supply. But it's not at all the case at work where we have all of these different flows of work and this kind of interconnected network. There's all these little places where when we widen a pipe in one place, we get better flow through the entire network

**Jean**

Right. And even with one person, you know, as a manager I definitely saw when people were not motivated, their output, however you measure output, it felt like it would fall to like a 10th of what I knew they were capable of. And when they were motivated it would skyrocket! When people want to work on the things they're working on, they work smarter, they work harder. And so, yeah, you're totally right. You know, we're not working in a factory where there's a fixed resource.

**Emily**

One of the things that was revolutionary for me this year was realizing that as a manager I did a lot of things to try to increase the motivation and retention and enjoyment and effectiveness of my team. All of a sudden I realized I was allowed to do that for myself. I had a big project going on and I was trying to really carefully optimize my time so that I could get all of the tasks that were up in the air for that project done. And I realized at one point it meant I was starting to cut the meetings and the conversations with my peers and with mentees that kept me engaged and excited. [And I realized that that half hour in the cafeteria chatting with someone about management philosophy or something that I really loved actually meant

that I got my next set of work done in two hours instead of four and it was totally worth the 30 minutes to make that happen.

**Jean**

Right. As engineer is it kind of counterintuitive. Another anti-pattern I've seen is when a team is not maybe delivering at the level the manager or PM or someone wants to see, there's a tendency to micromanage. Saying, okay, so how much are we getting done? And then let's set more granular goals--have people write the two hour tasks rather than the three day tasks. But then you kind of spend all this time really micromanaging these small tasks and people are not doing more work. Right? They just feel less empowered. Whereas if you said, with the right person, Hey, you know, here's a problem, do what it takes to solve it and update us, keep us informed--they're going to be way more motivated, feel way more empowered and supported, as long as you really define that container of how you work together really well.

**Emily**

I love the programming analogy of setting interfaces, saying this is how I expect you to check back in and this is the cadence I want to see and this is what a good update looks or this is the information a good update contains even as opposed to, please can you complete these tasks on these days with these methodologies.

**Jean**

Yeah. Even though it seems like, okay, if we pay closer attention to it, we'll know exactly where all the time is going and then we can optimize it. But then that's when you really see the motivation drop to that like one 10 marks and then, and then you're really trying to optimize something that is a very, very local situation.

**Emily**

It's like we can see where all the time is going--it's going into frustration. And now we can see that very clearly. So talking about choosing where folks might focus their time: You mentioned this term pet project, which I think is a really interesting one, because there's projects that we get excited about that are super well aligned and are huge wins and everyone's excited about. And there are those projects that we get excited about, Oh, that's just her pet project, it doesn't really matter. How do you tell the difference between the two?

**Jean**

We talk about this a lot in our workshop for tech leads, how to figure out where to spend your time. And the way I think about pet projects is that it's something that you're really passionate about and maybe you're good at or maybe you're trying to learn or be good at, but it's not really something that has team

impact right now. And so it's kind of like a work hobby, right? And it's good to have those--like having those conversations in the lunch room or having a project that you're working on with someone that is not your, your main project that you're working on. Those things are really important because they keep you engaged, they keep you happy at work, but to recognize it for what it is, so that you're not spending all of your time there, right? If you're spending all of your time on things that you really enjoy and you're good at, but the team does not need at all, that's not going to be a way for you to have more impact in your company.

### **Emily**

This might just be my bias, but listening to you, one of the things that popped into my head as kind of a rubric item for telling the difference is, does it have systemic impact? Am I impacting one person? Am I impacting one specific piece of code? Or am I picking up something that's going to establish a system, establish an approach of doing it, am I creating a framework item, am I setting a new best practice? And those are often going to be bigger unlocks and bigger results. And for the most part managers should be thinking at that systemic level of, how is what I'm doing going to scale.

### **Jean**

Yeah. And I think that can be a really challenging shift because the thing that is the kind of one off but still impactful on a more local level is the thing that we're so used to doing, right? It's going in and coding ourselves and making the changes ourselves. And so if you find yourself continuously being drawn to something that maybe doesn't have the impact you want, maybe ask yourself, how can I scale it? Like what are ways to have to get other people excited to do this type of work? Like for me it was deleting code, I love deleting code and cleaning up the code base. But what I would do is I would just spend time deleting code. Like as a manager of 15 people, I'd wake up and be like, Oh I have all these meetings, what I'm going to do to feel productive is wake up and delete a bunch of code before I go to work. And I'm in meetings all day. And then for me it was a shift from doing that to being like, okay, what would it take for the TEAM to be excited about & take pride in the hygiene of the code base and to have as much enthusiasm as I have for this type of work, because I think it's so important.

### **Emily**

I love the reframe you just made, because it gives a super clear recipe for how to take something that excites and interests you and extract from it, what is the systemic or cultural change that needs to happen?

### **Jean**

Right. And people to this day, people to this day at Medium will screenshot their GitHub code deletion pull requests, and then text them to me. And I'm like, this is great! Like five years later.

**Emily**

That's awesome. But that's such a great indicator of the impact that you had. And coming back to something you said at the very beginning, one of the things you love about managing and leading is creating that longterm impact. And those little touch points that really shifted how someone thinks, you were saying earlier how they think about themselves, but in this case it's how do they think about what a good codebase looks like? How do they think about what a good technical system is made of, other than clean architecture? It's also good code hygiene.

**Jean**

Yeah, and I realized that if I was the one cleaning up what I was, what they were learning from the experience was that, I'll clean up, right? Like they can do whatever and then I'll come in and happily clean up after them, which is not really a good lesson for them to take away.

**Emily**

Yeah. So you were talking a little bit there about this idea of when what excites me and what I want feels like the company is telling me no. I'm curious about when we create that voice for ourself and no one's ACTUALLY telling us. I can remember being in several positions earlier in my career where I was telling myself that the company just wanted me to execute and focus on my job and look small and get this thing done and it didn't care about my interest in management philosophy and how to be a good leader. And obviously when I say it out loud like that, of course the company cared about its leaders being good leaders and improving, but I felt like the things that I was curious about and the things that excited me about it were so different from how I heard everybody else describing their jobs that someone was just going to tell me it didn't matter to the company. How do you help folks think about the place where they're really excited about something and there's just a voice in their head that isn't actually coming from anyone else, telling them that no one would value, but if they did it?

**Jean**

Yeah. And I'll add onto that, I think there's another fear. One of the reasons that people don't set these big goals is that then there's the possibility that they can't achieve them. And so if you only set yourself up for a small incremental goals that you continuously hit, then then you maybe consider yourself like you're not failing at anything. And I think there is this shying away both from setting ambitious goals for yourself and talking about it with your company. Because the kind of the analogous situation is like, you talked to your manager and you say, Hey, you know, I'm not really doing this my current job, but I would really love to be part of the conversation about management philosophy and be more involved in organizational design. You're making yourself very vulnerable because you're opening yourself up for that person to say no. To say, Oh, that's not what we need from you right now. Whereas if you make the story that, Oh, they don't value it, then you're never confirming it. You just kind of believe what you want to believe.



**Emily**

Yes. And fear of the outcome we don't want is such a broad set of reasons why we don't jump in and take on the goals that we care about. You were talking right there about one kind of failure we can experience, which is someone else saying, no, I don't value this. What are some other fears that might prevent people from following the things that they're excited about?

**Jean**

I mean, there's a lot. There's: who am I? Who am I to want this? Like if someone's like, Oh, I want to be seen as an industry leader in this area--to feel like, well, who am I to think that I could be that? If you talk about the inner critic, the voice that tells you not to make big changes, everyone has many of them and they're all very different and very clever and trying to get you to stay where you are.

**Emily**

Yes. Next week, I'm talking with our guests about discomfort and a lot of that focus is on all of those voices that our primitive brain uses, that sounds so reasonable for keeping us staying in exactly the place that we are right now and not stretching.

**Jean**

I remember when I was pretty much only in more IC roles, and I saw everyone around me, that had roughly been hired right around when I was hired, moving into leadership roles whether that was tech lead or an engineering manager or leading the engineering team. And I was really baffled like, what's wrong with me that I'm not getting these opportunities, right? And in retrospect, I realized I was waiting for someone to say, Oh, you've done a really good job at like writing this code, so now you should lead people! Which sounds ridiculous in retrospect, but they had no indication really that I had an interest in that field, in leading teams. And then of course there are systemic biases, all those sorts of things. But you have to ask for what you want, but it can be hard to ask because then you're opening yourself up to someone saying no. Yeah, but you don't get what you want if you don't ask for it.

**Emily**

Yes. So one of the other reasons I find that folks don't follow excitement when they feel it, is that it feels too big. I think we talk a lot about feeling uncomfortable with negative emotion and not wanting to experience strong negative emotion. I think we also don't like to experience strong positive emotion. Are there ways you see that play out for folks?

**Jean**

Yeah. This is actually something we try to work into our workshops, because we think that, my

cofounder and I, think that, in tech, we don't make enough space to talk about our dreams and ambitions. We feel like, Oh, that's not really something you should talk to your coworkers about. So we create some space in our workshops to talk about, what's an aspiration for your career? And to get some more clarity around what that dream actually looks like. And so if you say, Oh, I want to start a company, [talking about] what's important to you about starting a company, coloring in the picture to get a better view of, what would that feel like? And really what people say afterwards is that just by talking about it, they get more clarity about their dreams or they realize there are dreams and goals that they didn't even realize until they were kind of forced to share their dreams and goals with like five different people in 10 minutes. Right? And that by talking about their dreams, they became much more realistic.

### **Emily**

It can be so hard to take that thing we're excited about and say it out loud, but sometimes it's hard to recognize it even within our own heads. I love that you're touching on this because our third episode is going to be vulnerability and it is all about not just being vulnerable with other people, but being vulnerable with yourself. And we were talking a few minutes ago about the idea that we might not tell someone else about a project we're excited about because they might tell us they don't think we can do it, or because we might have told them and then we find we can't do it very well and we're worried about feeling embarrassed. But sometimes we don't even want to tell ourselves what we're excited about because we open up that exact same conversation within our head. It's the risk of hearing our own voice say, you're not capable of that. Or the risk of committing to something inside our own head, not completing it, and what we think we'll tell ourselves or think about ourselves from not following through or from trying to follow through and telling ourselves we weren't successful.

### **Jean**

Right. Then will you see yourself as this person with all these failed dreams, right? That's not a flattering view of yourself.

### **Emily**

It's not. But when we come from the place of, I'm afraid to think of myself as a person with failed dreams, we take on this alternate persona, which is I am a failure at dreaming.

### **Jean**

I think the shift then is to think about, well if I'm never failing then, I must not be dreaming big enough. Right. Like as you're probably going to have, say you have like, I don't know, to put a number to it, 50 dreams. Like if these are ambitious dreams, maybe you'll be successful at two of them, right? And so you really SHOULD be failing all the time or having having dreams that are ambitious enough that you're not going to hit all of them! It's just hard to shake off that really practical, do the hard work and execute and

move from that, or not move from that because they're not separate, but to integrate a more dreaming and goal oriented and letting yourself think of ambitious things and want ambitious things.

### **Emily**

And I think understanding intellectually that we should want ambitious things and it's okay to, is totally different from putting it in practice. That is one of the things I'm learning so much. Just through the process of crafting and creating this podcast and the episodes that are part of it and all of the things that come along with it. When I looked at it to start with, I knew it was something that mattered in the world, I knew it was something that I was really excited and really driven to create, and I had this just sheer terror. I was going to have to tell other people the things inside my head that might make me weird and crazy-- which was amazing because every time I've told someone those things inside my head, the person has looked into my eyes and said like, yes, I'm so glad someone else feels this way. I get tons of positive validation around this and there was still that big voice in my head telling me, no, no, it's not safe.

### **Jean**

Right, and I think once you go through that a few times, then you start to recognize that sheer terror as a compass to what you should be doing, right? Because that means you're actually tackling something that gives you that feeling of like, Oh, I don't know if I can do this.

### **Emily**

Yes! And yet now a couple episodes into recording, it's actually starting to feel really easy and totally reasonable and I will say that switch happened much more quickly than the pessimistic voice in my head thought was going to happen. But just as easily as the little voice inside my head that was like, you know, this isn't that hard, the voice that's ACTUALLY about big ambitious dreams [said] this is easy. And you know, it was right and I did not believe it. Anything else you want to share with listeners before we wrap up?

### **Jean**

I would just say that shifting from not setting ambitious goals or intentions for yourself TO setting those goals or intentions can be a very hard shift. I know for me, being practical, setting realistic goals, it feels like that's sort of a big part of what got me here--being successful in school and doing the things I set out to do. It is a really hard shift to go from that to setting ambitious goals that you don't know if you can hit them or not. So just be kind to yourself and try different ways to let yourself even think about those things. Right? Whether that's sitting down with a friend who's also struggling with that and asking each other questions or maybe it's doing journaling or finding some workbooks or worksheets that help you think through these questions.

**Emily**

Thank you so much for taking the time to chat today. This was really fun.

**Jean**

Great, thanks for having me.

**End Interview****Emily**

Many thanks to Jean for helping me kick off Episode 1! I couldn't think of a better person to talk about helping leaders create the results they want at work, even if you don't have the positional authority. And now I hope you've got lots of good ideas floating around in your head for the results and impact you want to be having at work, but it's time to choose one and commit to it. So let's get started. I've got a couple of questions to help you choose. I'm going to pause briefly between each one, but you're welcome to pause the episode and think for longer. These are also great answers to write down.

What do you want to be known for, in life or at work? What excites you about having that reputation? What's the first big result you can deliver in that area? What excites you about doing that work? Not having done it, but what excites you about actually **DOING** it? The process of creating the result. Why are you the perfect person to do this? Alright, and for the final question, I want you to write this down on your phone or in your notebook, but put it in writing: What are you committing to? What's the result you're going to step up and create? And one final step. I want you to read that back out loud at a normal speaking volume, not under your breath or like you're running away from it. There's magic in saying something aloud like it's real and you're choosing to take on this goal, to create something in the world that comes from you bringing your best to the table. So own it! Embrace your excitement and embrace the discomfort. Don't worry. We're covering that next episode.

And the very last thing I've got for you this week. You now need to take your big results and ensure you have a really clear vision for it. To help you with that, I've created a quick vision worksheet and put it into a podcast guide for this episode along with the questions I just asked you a minute ago. Jump in the show notes and download it or text "excitement" to 44222 and we'll send it straight to your inbox.

I know as leaders and managers, you probably have a lot of project management experience breaking projects down into tasks with clear outcomes, scheduling them and adjusting to change. But because I always want to be giving you the very best I can, I've included a get started fast project framework in there too. It'll help you get everything you need to do to deliver your big result out of your head, out of hopeful land and onto your calendar, so you can actually get it done. So do make sure you grab that and that's it for this week.

Remember, you are capable of huge things. There are only three steps you ever need to take to make them happen. Create clear vision, stop distracting yourself and plan and take massive action. See you in the next episode.

If you loved this episode and want to dive deeper into improving your own emotional health so you can feel better and have bigger results at work, you have to join me for a one-on-one call. We'll talk about where you are, where you want to be, and create a solid plan to get from here to there. Just visit [go.exceptional.vision/call](http://go.exceptional.vision/call).

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