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EJ+ Live Content Session: Leading Through Uncertainty

Amy Bonsall with Ryan Drew

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Live Event Transcript

Ryan Drew:

Good morning, everybody. Welcome to this Evergreen® Journal Plus virtual event on Leading Through Uncertainty. It's great to have everybody here today joining us. Today I am joined by Amy Bonsall, a thinker and a practitioner whose work sits at the intersection of leadership, decision-making, and navigating uncertainty. Amy is the founder of Light Actions AI and the creator of the Heavy Expectations Light Actions Framework, which is a practical, curiosity-driven approach to moving forward when the path isn't clear. Her work helps leaders break through what's stuck—whether that's a decision they've been sitting on, a change they're navigating, or an AI opportunity or threat they're not sure how to act on.

Many of you already know Amy and will recognize her from our most recent gathering of teams back in Nashville in February of this year, where she reframed uncertainty not as a problem to be solved, but as a condition to be worked with. That left a lot of folks rethinking how they approach hard things. We heard from many of you who are joining us today that you wanted to go deeper, and so we're providing that option here.

Today's session is a live, interactive Q&A, and I strongly encourage you to submit your questions through the Q&A or chat function now or throughout the conversation. We also have a handful of questions that were submitted in advance of this event. I'm excited to ask Amy those as well as some questions of my own. I'll just start by saying, Amy, thank you for joining us. Anything you'd like to say before I start blasting you with questions?

Amy Bonsall:

Thank you for having me. I love the opportunity to go deeper. What we were just talking about before we jumped on live is that the nice thing about these sessions is the chance to get a little more into the weeds of what we're all experiencing as leaders. So thank you for submitting questions and for keeping them coming during the session—that's what makes it fun.

Ryan Drew:

Yeah, super cool. Maybe I'll start with a question before I throw a poll up. You opened your talk in Nashville and called it "Uncertainty: Friend or Foe," and that framing immediately challenged most leaders to think. Can you start by grounding us—tell everyone what you meant by that and what led you to that question in the first place?

Amy Bonsall:

Yeah, absolutely. I'll start by saying I think we're drawn to the work we need the most. I always felt that uncertainty was something to be minimized, rushed through, and managed. Then I became a designer and worked with a company called IDEO—a design-led firm—where we helped the world's biggest companies reinvent themselves, create new products, services, and experiences. What ensued was almost 20 years of helping leaders and organizations grow, and it turns out that growth was always precipitated by some sort of uncertainty. Market share was stalled. They didn't know how to access a customer base they were hoping to reach, and so on. What I realized as I was doing that work was that uncertainty was actually the precursor to all of that great innovation.

I spoke to this directly in Nashville in February for those who were there. I started looking back in history and saw that some of the greatest innovations came at periods of high uncertainty—the wristwatch from World War I, duct tape from World War II. All of these things came from uncertainty. So I started to reframe my own belief about it. I now really believe that uncertainty gives to us if we can adopt an approach and a mindset that allows us to access that. I'm one of the few people who actually thinks uncertainty is fun at this point, but I've also experienced its benefits over and over again. That's what I meant.

Ryan Drew:

I love that. I've popped open a poll to see where folks are coming into this meeting. We've got about half the participants answered, and there's a whole spectrum here—"I'm stuck, I know I need to move but I can't," "I'm moving but carrying a lot of weight about it," "I'm experimenting but not sure what I'm learning," and "I'm in a good rhythm." We've got representation all across that spectrum. A couple of folks are stuck, and a handful are in a good rhythm—so we've got it everywhere in between.

I'm going to close that poll now and move into the core of your framework. What is a light action? How is it different from what leaders typically default to when facing uncertainty? I'll be honest—I'm on the opposite end of the spectrum from you. I'm not someone who loves uncertainty. So maybe you can ground us there.

Amy Bonsall:

Yeah. And I'd say you're in really good company, Ryan. Most of us are at the opposite end of that spectrum. And there's a real—I won't geek out on this too much—but there's a real biological reason for it. Uncertainty historically meant danger. If you imagine way back in the days of saber-tooth tigers and cave living, a rustling in the forest probably wasn't a gentle breeze. It was probably a threat. We've all evolved to have a healthy fear of uncertainty, and it shows up in one of two ways: paralysis—let's not move, maybe the saber-tooth tiger will pass—or fight or flight—let's leap from the cave to the water, or whatever. I'm extending the metaphor a bit much, but the point is it's actually a very natural state to be in.

The framework I developed recognizes that, and it has two sides. One is this idea of heavy expectations—and once you see them, you can't unsee them. For those who weren't in Nashville in February, I told a story about a friend who was on a first date when the woman said, "I'm looking to have a baby within a year." He was like, "Oh my goodness—am I supposed to be the father?" She had inadvertently created a heavy expectation for him, and for herself, which made it hard to move forward. It's a laughable story, but once you start looking at it, we all do this to ourselves—and other people do it to us.

One of the most common heavy expectations we all carry right now is that we should be AI enthusiasts and AI experts. So that's one side of the equation. What really helps counter that—what helps us move through heavy expectations—is two things: noticing them (which softens them), and then looking for really small, safe steps that can move us forward. I've started calling these light actions. I used to call them experiments, but I realized we can make experiments feel really big for ourselves too. The idea of a light action is that it should feel so light, so easy, so safe that there's no reason not to do it.

Ryan Drew:

I know you and I talked about this before, but can you go into the three-step loop and the framework around that feeling of safety?

Amy Bonsall:

Yeah, absolutely. I'm going to screen share—it's very small on my screen, but you can see it big, right?

Ryan Drew:

Yep.

Amy Bonsall:

Okay. This is the framework I talked about in February, just as a reminder. Basically, heavy expectations often look like the left-hand side: seeing something as a problem, feeling like the next step is big and risky, and feeling the need to either leap or wait—and feeling like you need to “solve” your way out of the situation. Light actions is the antidote to all of that.

Let me share an example to bring this to life. Moving from heavy expectation to light action starts by reframing a problem as an opportunity. When I was at Old Navy leading innovation, we had a challenge: our plus business—women who were size 16 and above—was not at all aligned with the market opportunity. Something like 70% of the US market is in that category, and we weren't hitting that in sales. Before I joined, there had been a big initiative to solve this with a pilot in something like 50 stores. So we reframed it. Instead of “our sales are underperforming,” the opportunity became: “How can we better serve the clothing and shopping needs of women who wear plus sizes?” The opportunity is almost always found in the eyes of a person—whether that's a customer, an employee, or even ourselves.

The next step is moving from “big and risky” to “small and safe.” The small and safe thing we did was shadow those women—with their approval—by going shopping with them and going into their closets. We learned what it actually felt like to shop and dress as a woman who wore plus sizes. One of the key things we discovered is that it felt very isolating. Every plus section was at the back of the store, separated from everyone else. And then the next light action was: let's reinvent the women's section in just one store—all sizes, all styles, all one price—and see how people experience that.

One of the things that made that okay for us was that we deliberately weren't trying to hit a revenue or profit goal. That's what I mean by moving from solving to learning. We didn't care how much money we made that weekend—we cared that we learned whether this was a good experience for customers, because the revenue and profit follows. That's the framework: how do you make it smaller, lighter, safer? And one of the ways you know you're in learning mode rather than solving mode is that you're genuinely okay with any outcome—because you've made it small enough that so-called failure doesn't matter.

Ryan Drew:

Love that. Thank you for grounding everybody. What I'll do now is let the group know that we did ask a handful of questions coming into this event, and I'd love to work through those with you. But I also want to invite folks in the chat to share questions as we go, or commentary. Amy, you're open to having a conversation, and if anyone would like to share live, let us know—I'm happy to unmute you to present your question directly to Amy. I'm also happy to ask those questions on your behalf. We want to make sure we address what's on everyone's mind and help you get to your own light actions.

I think we'll close by asking: what's the light action you can commit to—whether it's before you close this meeting today or sometime this week. So, if you're okay with it, Amy, let's jump into some of the questions that came in advance.

One of the questions that came up was: in a consensus-driven culture, how do you move quickly while also being inclusive? Maybe we can start there.

Amy Bonsall:

Yeah, absolutely. And first I'd love to hear from people who are in that environment about what kinds of conundrums come up. But as I'm asking for that, I'll share that IDEO—where I spent a big part of my career—was a very consensus-driven culture. So I have a lot of experience with this, and there is real tension there.

Two things helped us. One was a philosophy of “let a thousand flowers bloom” and see what comes out of that. But at some point that ended up creating disconnectedness inside the organization. So we started to create what I'd call “gardens”—flowers can bloom here but not everywhere. In other words, as consultants, let's not try to address every industry in the world; let's pick areas and then give people creative space within those.

The other piece was: how do you create space for input in a consensus-driven culture, but then also move to a decision and move forward? Because in a consensus-driven environment, it can be really easy to spin. One of the big things we used was differentiating between “this is time to experiment and prototype” versus “this is time to act.” What was really interesting about the experimenting and prototyping side—which is a version of light actions—is that it wasn't just people talking. It was people doing and learning. I keep coming back to this: I think our most interesting problems are not solved by thinking about them, talking about them, or creating slides about them. They're solved by trying things, seeing how people behave, and iterating.

The example here sounds small, but anyone with a culture that's food-based or environment-based will understand: we cared deeply about our snacks at IDEO, and we came to a point in the San Francisco office where we needed to change snack vendors. Rather than a new vendor appearing overnight, there was a period where we experimented. We came in one day and there were new snacks and a whiteboard that said, “New snack vendor. We want your input. This is an experiment. We're learning. We're going to take advice and iterate.” That went on for a week or two. It wasn't very long, but when the new vendor was settled, people had already had their chance to act and experience it. We also had behavioral data as well as opinions—what people say they want versus what they actually reach for—and that's what helped us move forward. It's a small example, but you can see how it scales.

Ryan Drew:

Yeah. And it feels like communication is such an imperative element in that equation—transparency, listening, and then showing folks that you’re listening.

Amy Bonsall:

For sure.

Ryan Drew:

Very cool. Well, thank you for that. Another question that came in prior to this event, maybe a little more tactical: one of our managers drafted and distributed an important internal communication with an AI assistant but did not adequately proofread the final version before sending it. Given that AI is creating a paradigm shift that will rapidly affect all 400-plus employees across their organization, what best practices are you seeing companies implement to reduce similar issues while still encouraging adoption—training, policy, software controls, all of the above? What are your thoughts on that, Amy?

Amy Bonsall:

Yeah. Well, firstly, there is a tension here, and I’m seeing it in a lot of different organizations—you’re certainly not alone. It really highlights that tension between allowing people to experiment and actually needing to move the organization in a certain direction. One of the ways I think about AI—because I currently spend all of my days in it, I’m building in it constantly, and it’s changing really rapidly—is to think of AI as an untrained but eager intern. I think it really helps to personify it that way. How would you deal with an untrained but eager intern? They come back to you really quickly with some ideas, but they don’t have the context that you do in order to serve you well.

So part of it is raising awareness inside organizations about the state that AI is actually in. One tangible way to do this: Anthropic—the makers of Claude—created a framework alongside a couple of university professors to help people think about how to use AI. It’s called the 4Ds framework: Delegation, Description, Discernment, and Diligence. I can send this after, but what’s interesting about the framework is that it talks about the things AI does really well and the things humans do really well, and the best way to approach AI is to think about those distinctions from the very beginning. What are you delegating? What do you need to hold onto?

Be really clear in your description to AI—whatever AI you’re using—about what you’re asking it to do and what it can’t do. As a side note, when I ask AI to edit something for me, I say, “I would like you to review this and provide suggested edits, but don’t edit—that’s my job. Your job is just to reflect what I might be missing.” So describe clearly what the AI’s role is and isn’t. Discernment is the really big one—as a human, checking that work and knowing that it’s good. And diligence is about making sure you’re using it ethically. Providing people with some kind of system or structure like that to think about AI is really helpful.

Another piece of it is how you respond to mistakes. We are all going to make mistakes because AI is literally changing by the hour. Sharing those mistakes, owning them, being transparent and light about them does two things: it recognizes that we’re all in a learning loop together, and it also gives people permission to keep experimenting. If errors are treated as detrimental to the organization, it sends the signal that it’s not actually okay to play with this and try things. So those are a couple of the ways I think about it. There are software controls that can help constrain what’s sent back to the models, but I think the biggest thing is providing people the opportunity to understand AI’s role and its limits.

Ryan Drew:

Good point. Thank you for that. Maybe I'll pivot here to something that goes back to your framework and uncertainty more broadly. A question that came in was: how do you know when to pull the trigger on a decision? There were a lot of questions around AI, but I want to make sure we're weaving back into that uncertainty mindset. How do you know when to pull the trigger, Amy?

Amy Bonsall:

Yeah. And feel free to pop in and share some difficult decisions you're all facing. The phrase "pull the trigger" struck me—it signals that there's uncertainty in that decision. You're not confident about exactly what's going to happen, which is fair. We can't know everything going in. But to me, that phrase signals an opportunity to say, "Okay, maybe we don't know enough. Can we start smaller and learn as we go?"

Going back to the Old Navy example: what we ended up doing was putting all sizes, all styles, and all one price in the stores. That was actually something we had suggested from the beginning, but it was very uncomfortable to consider—there are financial implications, and for anyone who knows the fashion industry, there are significant technical challenges to making that happen. But by the time we got to that answer and actually deployed it, we were confident. We knew it was going to deliver the results we were hoping for. So when I hear the words "pull the trigger," I say there's an opportunity to make the next steps smaller and safer—so it feels less like pulling a trigger and more like taking a step where you know you're not going to fall on your face, even if you don't know exactly what you're going to learn.

Ryan Drew:

And someone just posted in the chat that "pull the trigger" suggests a significant and permanent impact, which I think is exactly what you're getting at.

Amy Bonsall:

Yeah, that's well put, Diana. It does feel like there's no going back from that.

Ryan Drew:

Maybe I'll pause for a second and ask the audience—either write it down on a piece of paper or post it in the chat—where are you carrying a heavy expectation right now? Maybe it's about yourself, your team, or your company. Where might a smaller first step actually unlock something? Drop that in the chat or share it out loud if you'd like—Amy would love to hear your voice.

As we think about some of the other questions folks asked: how do I lead a management team through ambiguity when some are eager for decisive direction and others are overwhelmed by change?

Amy Bonsall:

Yeah, that's really common right now. I was thinking about this as we were preparing—so much of the ambiguity leaders face right now is AI, not for everyone, but I was thinking about it as potentially the biggest uncertainty for our generation as leaders. And then I thought, oh, but we just had COVID—and that wasn't that long ago. We may get more than one.

I think it's really common in these periods of rapid change that people fall into one of two main camps: analysis paralysis—let's pause and wait for things to settle—or jumping ahead without enough information. I believe in making the next step sized to wherever the person or team is. Some people can

take bigger steps. They can see more, they have more confidence, they're more risk tolerant. Others need smaller steps.

Apologies for going back to AI, but that's where most of my work is right now. I have a client at a Fortune 500 company—a senior leader who knows she wants to do more with AI but told me, “Amy, I literally have no time for this.” I know that feeling. You're in a fast-paced job, barely have time to tie your shoes, never mind learn a new technology. So for her, we started with a five-minute AI task per week. It's super small, but it's just enough to get her tasting what more might feel like—to get excited, to get curious, to start seeing the possibilities.

When you have a team where some people are eager for decisive direction and others are overwhelmed by change, part of the work is getting under the skin of why. Over 20 years I've seen that every time there's uncertainty, there are functional reasons people feel the need to rush or to hold back—and there are emotional reasons. The functional ones are usually what people tell you. The emotional ones are often what's actually driving their behavior. So, fit the next step to size, find out what the emotional and functional blockers really are, and be really clear and transparent about: here's the time where we're learning, and here's the time where we're going.

The people who want to move quickly might feel comforted by the action that happens in the experiment period. The people who feel hesitant might also feel comforted by that action. Either way, you have clarity about different stages. And the last thing I'll say: action precedes clarity, and most of us feel better when we start moving. That's why I say make it as small as possible, but start moving. Even for those people who are hesitant, I'd be curious: if you make those next steps small but real, do they start to feel more comfortable?

Ryan Drew:

Yeah. As you were speaking, we had a few comments come in. One from Gary on the topic of carrying a heavy expectation: thoughts on differentiating between decisions requiring a significant strategic leap versus light action iterations—which is essentially what you just addressed. Tina mentioned “great information, start small, get moving,” which feels like a helpful distillation of the framework. And a few more comments around AI: current concerns about how AI will affect industry and security, fear of getting in too quickly and getting burned versus holding back too much and falling behind, and leading a team to implement AI governance. Those align closely with the questions we received in advance—really around how to ground yourself in that uncertainty.

You were going to add something—go ahead.

Amy Bonsall:

Yeah, I'm just nodding at this, especially the point about how AI affects industry and security. I'm curious what industry you're in, Damon. But one of the things I observed at IDEO—I did a lot of work in healthcare and financial services, in London, Singapore, and the US—is that those industries were putting regulation on top of regulation. They did that with good intent, to protect themselves. But it also meant they were slower at adopting change. And what would happen is startups wouldn't put those same constraints on themselves, so they could move faster even within the same regulatory environment. We're going to see that play out with AI too.

That's where I get curious. A big part of what I built at IDEO was a practice called venture design—helping organizations incubate startups for exactly this reason. They didn't want to impact their main

business, but they also wanted to experiment, learn, and grow in a new direction. So I'd be curious: is there an opportunity in your businesses to create a sandbox where you can explore what the future might look like, so you're meeting that anxiety about falling behind while also rightly protecting the core business from negative effects?

Ryan Drew:

So can we talk a little bit about practical application, Amy? On this topic specifically, it's come up in the chat. Let's say a leader is staring at a decision they've been sitting on for weeks or months. They know they need to move but they can't—maybe that's a psychological barrier, maybe something else. Walk us through exactly how you'd help them apply a light action to get unstuck. How would that work in practical application?

Amy Bonsall:

I'll share my own AI example.

I was running a consulting business helping people implement light actions, but it wasn't AI-based. This was last year, and I kept thinking, I feel like I could do more with AI. I feel like I could help people more through it. I knew there was power there, but I didn't know where to begin. It took me a little time to take my own medicine, but I finally said to myself: "I don't know exactly how I'm going to help people through AI, but I know I can't help them if I don't do anything." So, I sat down and built my first app in AI—which sounds really intimidating from the outside, but this is the world we live in now. Any one of us can build an app. We just need a little patience and persistence.

What I did was go into—I think it was ChatGPT at the time; I now mostly use Claude—and I said, "I want to build an app that helps anyone create a light action at any time, because I'm not sitting next to people when they're trying to figure out their next step." And it said, "I've got you." So we created it. I transcribed all of my client calls—with permission—uploaded them, and said, "This is the advice I give people. This is my voice. Can you create the script for an app?" And it did. Then I said, "How do I make this into an app?" And it told me to use a tool called Replit and walked me through it.

It took me about 24 hours and I made my first app, which was pretty rough, but I shared it with people, got feedback on how it was working, and that set me off. I now couldn't tell you how many things I've built with AI that help my clients and make my own business run more efficiently. But it all started with me saying, "What am I curious to try?" with no agenda attached.

So I'm now going to flip over and read what Gary's saying. But my advice for anyone staring at AI right now is this: we're at an inflection point. A lot of the leaders I speak with are using AI primarily as an editor or to make emails better. That's great—it's super powerful at that. But if you can get to a stage where you're asking AI to help you build things that take hours out of your week or serve your clients in a new way, that's when it becomes genuinely game-changing. Pick something you're curious about. Be okay with the fact that it's not going to work perfectly at first. It's probably going to be a little embarrassing—but you'll learn from it.

Okay, I'm looking at what you wrote, Gary: serving agricultural markets around the world with magazines and print products—how to meet markets' new needs as they migrate to personal AI tools. So your primary thing right now is serving people with physical products and physical experiences, and you're asking how you meet their needs as people use AI more and more. Super interesting.

One thing I'd say: I heard a stat recently that in-person events are actually on the rise. We're sitting at our computers so much, interacting with AI so much, that people want to be together more. So I think the fact that you have live events—whether webinars like this or in person—is something the world needs right now.

The question I'd start with is: what are the customer needs you wish you could meet better, that you've been limited on? In my example, I wished I could sit next to clients and help them come up with light actions in a cost-effective way—and I couldn't. That's where I created my first app. Start from the unmet or underserved needs of your customers or clients, then ask: how can you try something, give it to them, and see how they react to find out whether it actually meets their needs? That's how you start small.

Ryan Drew:

Very cool. Can we pivot for a second to something that struck me in your Nashville talk—this idea of shifting from pressure to play. What does play mean in a professional context? For an executive with accountability to employees, customers, and family—both personal and professional obligations—what does that mean in the broader sense?

Amy Bonsall:

Yeah, absolutely. It comes back to that difference between solving and learning. Play—and I want to preface this—doesn't mean horsing around. Play means trying something without an expectation on it, without knowing exactly how it's going to land. Usually that needs to be something that won't directly move the needle on profit or revenue—because, fair enough, you don't want to mess that up. I've sat on the executive team of a public company. I understand that. But play does mean trying something you can learn from, something you're curious about, something that keeps you going.

That first app I created was a little painful. It's a lot easier for me now than it was then, but I was curious enough to keep going and figure it out. The second thing I built was a tool to help me get stronger for pickleball, because my right hand, wrist, and shoulder were seriously sore. I wanted a six-week training plan just to get my strength up. Nobody was going to eat or not eat based on whether I got that tool right or wrong. Taking something that has nothing to do with work and just playing with it is a really nice way to start. Make it something that genuinely means something to you.

Ryan Drew:

So what are the signals that you're dipping back into the pressure zone? That personal example makes sense to me—easy to see how that works. But in the working world, how do you create space to play in the way you just described? What are the signals that you're slipping back from play into pressure?

Amy Bonsall:

Yeah. The biggest signal for me is how much you care about the answer or outcome. If you genuinely don't care whether you succeed or fail—if your mindset is "What did I learn by doing this?"—then you're in the play zone. If you care too much about the answer, you're in the pressure zone. And if you care so much that it's stopping you from moving forward, you're definitely in the pressure zone. At that point, ask yourself: how can I take something away? How can I make this even smaller?

Ryan Drew:

Okay, I'm going to popcorn through a few more questions. One was: how do we get connected with leaders looking to level up their organization when many are cutting outside support? Thoughts on that, Amy?

Amy Bonsall:

Yeah. I feel this as a consultant. I don't know what business you're in and I'd love to hear more, but I do feel that a lot of organizations are battening down the hatches right now and not looking for outside support. The approach I take is one of care and curiosity. Whenever I'm speaking with a leader, I'm curious what's going on in their world, and if I can offer or gift them anything, I do. That's genuinely what tends to bring me to leaders who are interested and open to outside support—having enough of those conversations and going in without a specific agenda, which I think reduces the pressure. A lot of people frankly want outside support but don't feel they can justify the spend right now.

So there's that tension: they want it, they need it, but they either don't have time or don't feel they can spend the money. If the pressure is taken off those conversations and they feel like generosity instead, people remember and come back. Without knowing more about the industry, that's how I'm approaching it.

Ryan Drew:

Love that. A couple more comments have come in as we've been chatting. Jamie was commenting that if you can find small things within your business that AI will make faster and easier, that's the best place to start. Everybody thinks too big—just need to take small steps. Another comment: they created an AI prompt to help write press releases using their company's core values to get the necessary information into a consistent format. Super small, but very helpful.

Amy Bonsall:

I love those, Jamie. Plus one on all of them. And I'd say one of the easiest ways to identify something in your business that AI might help with is to ask: what do I really not like doing? What do I wish I could spend fewer hours on? That's a great thing to bring directly into Claude, Copilot, or ChatGPT and say, "I would like to outsource this. Can you help me think about how?"

Ryan Drew:

Yeah. I just launched another poll since AI seems like the natural place to continue. We have about 10 minutes left, but I'm curious: when it comes to AI, which of these feels most true for you right now? "I haven't started—I feel behind." "I've tried a few things." "I'm using it personally but not sure how to bring it into my organization." Or "AI is already changing how we work."

Looking at the live results: about 75% say AI is already changing how we work, and they want to go deeper. So the vast majority are at the higher end of the spectrum. That doesn't mean there aren't folks who haven't started—there are a handful—but the folks you're talking to today, Amy, are largely in the same space you are, which is interesting.

Amy Bonsall:

I love it. And what's interesting is that you can be in that quadrant—"AI is already changing the way I work"—and still feel behind.

Ryan Drew:

Very polarizing. I agree.

Amy Bonsall:

That's the world we're living in. I feel like Claude is dropping a new model every hour, and there are a zillion tools out there. It feels like there's constantly more to learn than we can keep up with.

Ryan Drew:

Absolutely. Let's talk about a few more specifics. You and I have had plenty of conversations offline about what we're building. I believe you mentioned a stat at your talk—I have a note to myself—that 95% of AI pilots fail. What's the connection between that failure rate and heavy expectations in the context of what you've been sharing? What are leaders doing wrong at the start?

Amy Bonsall:

Yeah. Well, firstly, I saw a new stat recently that said 20% of businesses are currently capturing 75% of the value. Classic conundrum. I look at the word pilot, and I think that's where the error is. A pilot is already big. That's again why I say light actions, not pilots, not experiments—because we often put expectations on a pilot or experiment without even realizing it. We expect it to deliver something. So, my guess is a lot of these efforts were too big, for one thing.

For another, I'm curious what others who are deep into this are experiencing, but I have a master's in engineering, which I'm finding really helpful right now—not because I'm digging into code, but because I learned the perseverance of trying something, having it fail, debugging, and iterating. That's the reality we face with AI right now. In six or nine months it might feel different, but there's a lot of persistence required to go from “I have an idea” to “I've created it” to “it's actually saving me time.” And a lot of leaders I talk to just don't have much time right now—so that could be a piece of it too.

Ryan Drew:

Yeah. I had a question for you around the “zero time” problem—when a leader says, “I know I need to do more with AI, but I have zero time.” What's the first light action you'd give them?

Amy Bonsall:

To be really direct: look at one thing in your week that takes a few hours, is repetitive, and that you don't love doing. Invest the time to get AI to do that for you. What you've done is created time. There's this constant back-and-forth with AI where you spend time to create time. If you can get that first thing to actually save you time, it feels amazing. And then you think: “Oh, I have these two extra hours this week—or even an extra 30 minutes. I'm going to dedicate that to seeing what else I can do.” So very tactically: write down one thing you do repetitively that doesn't require particular expertise. Can you get AI to do a big chunk of it? Then find time to do that—or ask for help.

Ryan Drew:

We also know, because we just learned that the majority of this audience is already using AI significantly, that we asked in the event registration: where would you like to go further with AI as a leader, and what would make it feel doable? I'm curious what your answer to that question would be—through your experience with others you're working with, or just your own reaction.

Amy Bonsall:

Well, it sounds like a lot of people are already playing and building, which is super cool. What I'm seeing with leaders I've spoken with is that many are using AI to edit, to write, to make presentations. The next step I'm taking them to is actually building with it, because that's where the real time savings happen.

And then the step after that is asking: now that we've saved some time, how can I serve my customers in a way that I couldn't a year ago? That's where my years of innovation experience really light up, and where I really want to play with AI. How can I serve customers better today than I could a year ago

because I have this tool and this approach? So the three stages I'm seeing are: using it to edit, using it for productivity gains, and then using it to innovate.

For myself, I'm doing a mix of the last two. I'm continually trying to make my business more efficient—building what's called an AI-native business, where everything flows through AI first—but I'm also asking: how can I support people better or differently now than I did a year ago?

Ryan Drew:

So I think you'll appreciate this: I just popped a poll asking folks in the audience what's the one thing most likely to get in their way of taking a light action this week. And it's almost split evenly into thirds: not having enough time to think it through, worry that small steps won't be enough, and getting pulled back into urgency mode. In the spirit of where we are timing-wise, I'd love your thoughts on that, Amy—and maybe some advice for folks who want to walk away and actually take one light action. How do you break through those barriers?

Amy Bonsall:

That's so interesting to see. Thank you, everyone, for sharing. I want to start with the worry that small steps won't be enough, because this is something I've seen over and over in my career. In innovation work, it always, always felt like we were starting too slowly and taking too long. I remember all the way back to the Old Navy example—when I suggested we go out and talk to people, the next big step we actually took was going to karaoke, because we wanted to experience being on stage in front of a crowd just as our plus customers had to perform in fitting rooms. To the CEO and executive team, those steps probably looked like, “What is she doing?” But they served us so well in the end—they brought the exact pain points we were solving for and allowed us to navigate in a way we never would have otherwise. Those small steps led to the big change, and I saw this over and over: starting small actually moved organizations to a place of certainty, usually after teams had already tried and failed to move in bigger ways.

On getting pulled back into urgency: I would say, make the next step so small it feels laughable. That's one of the biggest muscles to build—tolerating the feeling that it's “too small.” Make it so small it's laughable. And I'm going to drop the link to the second version of the tool I created in the chat. If it can help you generate a light action, it's a five-minute exercise. And if you find yourself getting pulled back into the urgent, make the next step even smaller—and don't beat yourself up for going slowly.

Ryan Drew:

Well, thank you for taking the time today. I know you mentioned before we got started that you welcome conversations about this even outside of this session—maybe you can tell folks how they can get in touch with you.

Amy Bonsall:

Absolutely. I love all the questions, but I also love the dynamic of a real back-and-forth. So if anyone wants to get on a call, your next light action could be emailing amy@lightactions.com to set up time. By the end of 30 minutes, we'll have a light action for you.

Ryan Drew:

Love that. Well, thanks for taking the time, Amy, and thank you everybody who joined us today. I want to be mindful of the clock, and I know that's a hurdle for folks—so I appreciate you all sharing that. I also want to make you all aware of our upcoming session in August. We've been welcoming leaders like Amy

to join us for these live AMA sessions, and we'll be welcoming Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, a globally recognized talent expert. Keep an eye out on our website and in your email for details on that event. You will also be briefly prompted for a survey as you close out of this session today. We would love your feedback, which we'll be sharing with Amy as well—both how this went for you and how we can make it better in the future. With that, happy Tuesday, everyone. We look forward to seeing you again very soon. Amy, thank you again for joining us.

Amy Bonsall:

Thanks, everyone. See you soon.

Ryan Drew:

Thanks for coming. All right—bye-bye.