

PROFESSIONAL
TROUBLEMAKER
with LUVVIE AJAYI JONES

SEASON 5, EPISODE 2

BUILD THE FOUNDATION

The more people I hired at the guidance of my executive coach, I thought I'd feel less weight, but no, I felt like I was still working too hard, still having too much on my plate and still under a lot of pressure, I felt like things were still not stabilized and I'm seeing all this money going out the account.

And I'm just like, Why am I still this stressed? 2023 had hands and boxed me like I stole something from his mama. Last year was tough in so many ways and in business, it was brutal. I've told you about how at one point I thought I was about to go bankrupt and how it all shook my confidence hardcore. What was crazy was at the beginning of the year, I was feeling confident about what 2023 had to offer.

I felt that my team was set, was prepared to execute our strategic plan. And I just knew we were going to double our 2022 revenue. I was so young and full of hope. And instead what happened was I basically fired everybody. My revenue was half what it was for the previous year. And I lost trust in my ability to lead.

So in this episode, I am telling you my business. My business. When I started writing the script for this, like really break it out, I realized it's actually longer than one episode. So this is part one of two parts to let you know what actually happened in 2023 that almost took me out y'all. But first let me tell you why I do what I do.

I want to tell you my why, I give people courage to take transformative action in their lives and how I do it is through creating multimedia content that makes people feel joy, think critically and compels them to take disruptive action. I am a brand and I am the brand and I've built my company to a seven figure revenue in the last few years.

And I'm really proud of what I do. And I know that I am pretty singular for a few reasons. So I'm a bestselling author, speaker, entrepreneur, book coach. I've written four New York Times bestselling books. I have spoken on stages all over

the world. And my TED talk has over 9 million views. And I've been working for myself for the last 14 years.

So if you listened to the last episode, you got more information about how I actually got started on my entrepreneurship journey and how it wasn't the original plan. Y'all got the cliff notes. If you didn't listen to the last episode, go back one. All right. So Awe Luv Media is my company and the industries that I'm at the intersection of are culture, media, business, tech. You can even throw in some social justice in there.

For a lot of years, it was just me and an executive assistant. And what I was able to do with basically being a solopreneur was really impressive from when my first book came out in 2016 and I created and executed a marketing strategy that made it an instant New York times bestseller. And it changed my life to now what I can say is that I've been able to do what I've done because of my considerable work ethic. Like I used to run like work 12, 14 hour days, my unyielding grit, I will not quit till I get what I want. And my resourcefulness, like my hustle is real and also a huge giant dose of God's grace, because I've also risen in spite of myself at times, in spite of the mistakes that I've made.

Truly, I have been God led, God held, God protected. And I see so many moments of my journey that were not of my doing. Like God was working on my behalf and I don't take that for granted. And my gratitude is immeasurable. So all of that, throw all of that in the pot. That's how I got where I am now. So before I tell you what happened in 2023, let me tell you how I even got to build a team.

In 2019, I realized it was time to build a proper team because my vision for my work was massive and I couldn't do it with just one other person on my internal team. My speaking is a forgotten conclusion because that Ted talk that I have is the best lead magnet. I still get people who are watching it every day who like, come speak at our companies.

It's the best lead magnet ever. And on every stage that I take, I basically book another job because people go, you killed that. So my speaking fee has increased steadily over the years. And then my writing led to more book deals. I was represented by talent agency, ICM, who managed my speaking and TV. I am now represented by UTA, United Talent Agency.

But my day to day, it was time to expand. Like my speaking and writing were managed by other people, but inside my company. I knew it was time to get bigger. It was time to activate the other revenue streams that didn't depend on

my physical presence or my individual creativity and brainpower. So brand partnerships, courses, products, and I was still managing a hundred percent of my content and my social media.

So I knew it was time to fire myself and hire more. So I did. let me break down my way of making money at this time, right? At that time of 2019. Speaking engagements, writing assignments. So if I was writing for, you know, Ebony magazine or Essence, whatever that thing is, right, book advances, brand partnerships.

I only did a few of those. I didn't pursue them. I didn't really have a lot of time. So those were a few. Merch drops. Like I drop a t-shirt and I'm thinking about it and people would be like, yo, we love that. And that was also kind of sporadic. And I was also doing consulting on the side. Like, you know, I'm a marketer, I'm a brander.

So I'm always available to help a business owner do and get close to their mission. But I didn't do a ton of it. Right. I also didn't have time for it. And then teaching courses from time to time. I would teach, I actually used to teach webinars regularly around different business topics. So people can tap in and they would sell out.

So those are the ways that I was making revenue, but by a lot, most of my revenue was from my speaking and my writing. The year that I crossed a million dollars in revenue was 2019. And that year I did over 20 speaking engagements and I got my second book deal. It was for my book, Professional Troublemaker: The Fear-Fighter Manual.

It was a major deal. It was bid on by 12 publishers. In that year I also got married. It was a big year for me, truly an expansion of territory. And then March, 2020 happened and COVID took over the world and shut it all down. Okay. And I remember panicking a little bit because as a speaker, how was I going to make money when the world was inside?

Well, turns out thought leaders like myself didn't have to worry. We were in demand doing virtual talks. I remember one day I did two speaking engagements from my house in my pajamas. Okay. With a blazer on, it was sweet. That's the year that I started hiring more people. That year also, let me tell you companies was not playing with this speaking game. I actually did a speaking engagement in front of 17,000 people on Zoom, like Epic for a global one of the biggest global PR brands. So again, the mission was to activate other revenue streams that did not depend so much on me.

I wasn't hiring a team because I wanted to be a CEO or whatever. Like I wanted to wear that title. It was by necessity because it is simply bad and risky business for your money to be tied to one person. Even if that person is the one whose name is on the company, that is an objective fact. It is a bad business move.

My business was risky. And at that point, I had an executive assistant who managed my calendar, my emails, and helped book my travel. and then the next position I hired for was a content assistant who was helping me create graphics. I of course had an attorney who managed my contracts and an accountant filed my taxes and did my bookkeeping.

And I had a marketing lead who was working for me on a contract basis. And I think I even had a community manager. Cuz at that point I had a community called LuvvNation. It was a lean operation. Nobody was full time except for my executive assistant. And she was full time, on like a contract basis, right?

So with the Professional Troublemaker book scheduled to publish in March 2021, I knew I had to ramp up because it was considered a big book. I needed to do well and live up to the hype and the advance. Like this was not, I'm Judging You where they just threw some coins at me. This was a major investment by Penguin Random House, who also wanted to be my publishing home. So at the end of 2021, I onboarded a publicity team, shout out Skai Blue Media. I love y'all. I got an executive coach who would work with me and this growing team. I upgraded my accounting package. 2021 was a run from jump.

Okay. This podcast got rebranded to be called Professional Troublemaker. And on my birthday, January 5th, in 2021, I relaunched this podcast. And then book publicity started hardcore because the book was coming out the first week of March. So two months, March came, my 50 page marketing strategy that I had built for this book worked. The book hit the New York Times bestselling list in the hardest category. Okay. The hardest category, which is the how to miscellaneous at number three, I might as well have been number one because the two above me, Where one, a book that had been on the list for 60 something weeks and another book was by like Jordan Peterson, the therapist who, whenever he drops a book, he don't even say nothing about the book.

And the book sells 12 million copies. I was number three. Okay. So I, it was epic. And again, we're inside. I did a seven stop virtual book tour. That sold 7,000 tickets. I don't think my publishers have ever seen that before. It was massive. And that book was a hit. Like people's responses to Professional Troublemaker, the impact it was already making.

My editor even got promoted. Okay. My editor got promoted. Epic. That book. I'm still so proud of that book. So I looked up and I realized I had a team now and they were mostly full time. So full time was my executive assistant, my content assistant. We got a junior assistant and then on the contractor side.

So external, my executive coach, my legal team, my accountant package was really a fractional CFO. Now, plus I had a marketing strategist to help me with my heavy projects. I was officially bossing it. And that was the point where it got really real. I was now running a business with payroll. Okay. Like real payroll.

Anyway, let me fast forward to September, 2022. At this point, I had written three New York times bestsellers because my book, *Rising Troublemaker: A Fear-Fighter Manual for Teens* came out May, 2022. So a year after *Professional Troublemaker*. And now I had a team of seven people internally. I had a director of operations.

My executive assistant was now my chief of staff. We had a junior assistant, content coordinator, marketing assistant, and somebody working and doing graphics with us. And I had a bunch of contractors. I was still paying on retainer. So I had a marketing strategist, my executive coach, a fractional CFO, my legal team, my publicity team.

So what's that y'all we got about, that's about 11 people that I'm paying every month plus myself. Cause I got to, I got to eat. So that's really 12 me. at this point. My burn rate per month was over a hundred thousand dollars by burn rate. I mean, expenses I was spending. Over a hundred thousand dollars a month to run my company.

Because remember all those revenue streams, they were supposed to be activated for me. So our revenue wasn't just based on my speaking and writing. That was the reason why I had that team. Yeah. Nope. Most of the company's revenue was still on my back and on my brain. We were a multimillion dollar company, mostly from my brute efforts. **"Go me!" For having that power working that hard being able to do that output. But again, Terrible business model. Okay. And often spewed rule in business is that your team should bring in three times the amount you spend on them in revenue. Mine was not.** And let me say before I go further, because I'm going to talk about specifics and failures and ball drops.

And I'm not talking about them to embarrass anyone or to even point fingers, because at the end of all of this, I will tell you where and how I messed up

because the leader takes the blame. As they take the credit, things happen in cycles. And the people who work for me, we're not bad people. The people I let go of or fired who even messed up, I don't consider them villains.

They are characters in a story that unfolded as it should. And I have no ill will. So shit happens. So I just had to put that out there because I'm going to get specific about how people were messing up, what was going on that had me losing my mind how people were just dropping the ball left and right.

So let me continue and let me tell you what everybody else's job was because you might be like, now Luvvie, how you end up with 12 people? Like what is happening and how they not doing nothing. Let me tell you. Like I had reasons. I didn't hire everybody all at once. I was hiring as I thought we needed people.

And again, remember I had an executive coach who was guiding me in the process. So I also wasn't hiring randomly just by my own volition.

September, 2022 actually was significant because that's actually when I hired a director of operations for the first time, an executive coach who was guiding me in the process.

And her role was to manage the day to day to get me out of weeds of the company. Cause it was killing me to be both the creative visionary, who's writing these books and all this content and coming up with these ideas and being the pragmatic CEO who's looking at P&Ls. And who is making financial decisions on how much we're paying somebody and making sure that our taxes are up to date and make, it was killing me.

Okay. So I was told, you know what, get an ops director and the ops director was there to be able to make decisions. So I also, I'm not the bottleneck for everything. Cause decisions were living and dying with me. And that was a lot of pressure. Is a lot of pressure. So their job was to basically give me the space to make. To also be able to ideate because when I'm able to ideate and visionary and write and speak and do more of that type stuff, the company wins.

Like we make more money and I'm able to serve more people in a more impactful way. But I can't do that if I'm reading P and L's every day and still signing contractor NDAs. So this director of operations was hired with the idea of take me out of all of that stuff. So I can really embody my zone of genius and help us build the revenue and activate those streams, build the plans, manage the plans and watch the team.

Then I had my chief of staff. So my executive assistant of two years had been promoted to chief of staff, to basically want to empower her, she definitely got a raise, a big old raise, and so she can keep her pulse on the rest of the team. She was also going to still be charged with managing my calendar, was the one who was inside my emails, like, not just let me forward her email, she had my password.

And she made sure she managed my plate. She was my right hand, okay? She was my gatekeeper. Things would go through her to filter up to me. And then we got a junior assistant to do lower level admin tasks. So to manage our company email that is on our websites, to make sure that that stuff is being filtered to the right place.

Ultimately, she was an assistant to my chief of staff, right? I wanted to be fair about workload. Then we had a content coordinator whose job was to create strategy and content for my social platforms. Including videos, editing, those repurposing my already robust library of content and making sure we are posting it.

She wrote some copy, like I've done and created so much content between my books, my blog posts, my social media over the years that I promise you, if I never create one more piece of new content, there's still years of content I can post. So that is this content coordinator's job. And then we had my marketing assistant to manage the actual social platform. To people, helping create, any other work, like the content coordinator, consider the marketing assistant, her assistant. All right. And then we hired a, just a project based graphics associate to just create all things graphics for us. Cuz we had graphics that were piling up. We had another book that was coming out.

So, Hey, content coordinator, come up with the idea of of the content. Graphics associate design, the content. Marketing assistant, go throw it up on social media and make sure it does well. All right, and then my contractors. So I had my marketing strategist, somebody who I've been working with for years and she does high level marketing.

So whenever it's done, it's time for one of our major campaigns or the books. She helps me build the plans like her and I collaborate and we build the big plan that everybody executes. My executive coach and she was tasked with making me a better leader and empowering the team to take ownership She met with my team weekly like I'm talking she was coaching them every week.

You know, what are your obstacles, what do you need in place? And then she met with me every other week Let me know where the team was. Let me know where I needed to move out their way or where I needed to show up more. Like I was being actively coached plus I was in therapy too. Okay. Amen. Amen. And then our CFO managed all things, finances, payroll, account receivable, payable 401k.

Cause again, people were full time. They were salaried. With 401k benefits. I was too. So our CFO managed all that anything, money, boom, them legal team, contracts, trademarks, negotiations, licensing, all that publicity team, they managed all my press. And that front face and appearance and then my agents at UTA managed my speaking, Y'all Awe Luv Media was not this lean operation from before.

It was an operation that at times felt heavy. It was a company I felt like I had grown boss my way into a whole empire and it was all on my back All on my back and let me tell you I also pay You Very fair wages. One of my values is that I compensate folks for their work. I'm a small company who couldn't compete with the big wigs, but everybody's pay was aligned with ranges that like salary.

com agreed with, because I ain't want to be the person that was preaching about equity and that people were starving on my behalf. People were full time salary with benefits. I was making a lot of money. But I was spending a lot of money, again, a six figure burn rate per month, spending over a hundred thousand dollars on my team every single month with the idea that I wanted to make impact, wanted to be supported in it, wanted to not burn out while I was doing it.

I needed people to do their job. Now, something else about September, 2022, I was starting to get overwhelmed by all of it. Because even with the team, I still felt like so much was still falling on me. **The more people I hired at the guidance of my executive coach, I thought I'd feel less weight, but no, I felt like I was still working too hard, still having too much on my plate and still under a lot of pressure, I felt like things were still not stabilized and I'm seeing all this money going out the account.**

And I'm just like, Why am I still this stressed? Why? Why? Okay. So I talked to one of my mentors and I said, I want to grow this company, right? But my team doesn't feel optimized. Like something's off. And that mentor goes, I have someone who I think could help you, who can basically audit your team and the

processes that you guys have and the way you're running and help you tighten the ship.

So she introduced me to an HR expert and consultant whose expertise is in growing sustainable teams. So I entered into a three month contract with this brilliant woman and her work was to observe my team, our meetings, and give me recommendations on what to tweak and possibly even if there's any redundancies on my team.

And I was like, I'm going to call you the team gardener. Cause you're going to help me weed out what's not right. All right. Shout out to Lisa and Sally. So September 22, what happens? Our director of operations starts. And a team gardener starts observing the team. Like she is literally in our Slack channels.

She is in our WhatsApp messages. She's seen our project management software base camp. She's in it just watching. And most of the time she's quiet and her and I are meeting once a week. And she's giving me observance. She's telling me what she's seen, what she's noticing. I'm asking for feedback. Cause I'm like, tell me, tell me what I'm doing.

If it's not conducive. To leading this team in the way they should be led. like number one, her number one assignment actually that I gave her was, I need you to let me know what I need to adjust. Like I know, but starts and stops with me. So tell me there first and then tell me what other people need to be adjusting.

Okay. So a month into her observing our team. She recommends that I fire my content coordinator. Not only was she operating in ways that didn't make sense and were creating chaos, she was making a lot of mistakes in her work. So I was running behind her and fixing those mistakes. And many of those mistakes were front facing.

So they were like showing up on my platforms or on my newsletter, like things were being late and I could not understand why. Mind you, this content coordinator had been with me for a year and a half. So I was like, what's happening long story short we fire content coordinator. That's the first fire that happens like literally within a Month of our gardener sitting in our meetings She's like yo, I think you have too many junior varsity players They cannot do what you need them to do and operate at the level you need them and I was like, oh Oh, snap.

Is that what's happening? She was like, yeah, I think we're probably going to have to fire a couple of more people. **So let me tell you before 2022 ended, we**

actually ended up firing three people. Okay. At the same time, I empowered, my director of operations and my chief of staff to take ownership. Like both my executive coach and the gardener were like, empowered both of them to now step up, like give them decision making power.

With criteria, like even give them some signatory power, like they can sign certain low stake contracts. On the company's behalf. So my, legal team came up with criteria of what type of contracts that my director of operations and chief of staff can sign where y'all ain't got a way for me to come off a plane, to sign some of these y'all can go ahead and do that.

And I started calling my director of ops and my chief of staff, my leads. That was my shorthand for them. They were my leads. So the company's hierarchy was me, my leads, everybody else. Okay. So then I stopped having to manage everybody else. I'm only talking to my leads really on any given day. You know, we go, they said they wanted to elevate me.

So like my coach and the gardener were like, we want to promote you to CEO for real. So you're not managing all these things. What does that look like? You're going to have to create a buffer between you and the rest of the team. So my leads, were that buffer. November, 2022, we do a 2023 strategy retreat planning day.

I bring my leads into Chicago. One of them lived in Chicago. One did not my general counsel, my legal team. My attorney was in the room, fractional CFO, bring them in, fly in my gardener and a member of my publicity team. Everybody sit in a room oh, and my executive coach was on zoom and we spend eight hours creating a strategic and execution plan for 2023. It's something I hadn't stopped to do before. So it was so significant that we were doing it. And I was so excited because I was like, yes, yes, this is making sense. It's given me, you know, the Capricorn in me loves a good plan and a framework. You hear me love that. All right. And it was a highly productive day.

I was energized by what we laid out for a promising 2023, especially because we had a strong path to creating the company I wanted to build the company that I was like, Oh, finally, which was the one that would serve people make money and not scalp me in the process. Right. that's what we talked about that day.

What do we want to accomplish in 2023? What is my vision for the company? Okay, cool. What does it take to execute that vision? Who does it take to

execute that vision? What's the timeline to execute? We broke it down. Okay. We had a plan. Everybody was excited. It was promising. And we ended the day at a celebratory dinner where I spent four figures.

Okay. Cause I say, you know what? Ball out. It's fine. We gonna eat. Yes. Get the champagne. Go ahead. Pop. I don't even drink y'all. Look, anyway, our team gardener, who at this point was truly a business mentor to me, told me she was confident that I actually didn't need her anymore. She was proud and said, I can tap on her for advice whenever I need, but she was not going to be sending me another agreement or another invoice.

And I was like, Oh my God, thank you. And at the same time. I felt like my executive coach had also gotten me to a good spot. You know, we'd been working together for two years, so even for revenue's sake, that was two less contractors, two fewer people to pay for 2023. And I was grateful to both of them. So before 2023 began, me and my leads decided we'd be letting go of our marketing assistant whose work had gotten really sloppy, like we needed to triple check everything she did.

And we knew we would. We would have to hire for that role and the content coordinator we'd fired in the new year. Okay. So remember I told you we fired like three people. **By the end of 2022**, yes, marketing assistant content coordinator, we actually, promoted our junior assistant to content assistant.

Cause she's been amazing. Okay. And we were like, okay, we'll need to get a new junior assistant. To do the work. yeah, 2023 was really looking promising for all of media. We were looking forward to a year where everyone would work in tandem, taking ownership and being clear what the mission and vision was, and we had the map.

Or so I thought. Check again. I was young and full of hope because what actually happened. In 2023 was the opposite. It was a plot twist. I did not see coming. It was not on my bingo card. So I'll stop here as part one, because I've already gone long. Part two will be the crumbling. Okay. On the next episode, I'm going to talk about exactly what happened in 2023.

In fact, by July, 2023, everything had been wiped. And I was in rebuild mode and I'm telling you it was like whiplash because what a difference seven months made. And before my outro, let me say this. If y'all are feeling this podcast, I definitely want to hear from you. Tag me to thoughts @Luvvie on whatever platform you use most.

Let me know if this is hitting so far. All right. All right. part two. Yeah. You're gonna hear all the tea, all the tea.