

# Pioneers and Pathfinders: Rudhir Krishtel

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## **Steve Poor**

Hi. This is Steve Poor, and you're listening to Pioneers and Pathfinders.

As lawyers ascend to leadership roles within their firms and organizations, they often face difficult challenges, such as how to seek guidance, coping with feelings of isolation, and similar circumstances. Our guest this week, Rudhir Kristel, is dedicated to supporting legal professionals in navigating these issues as an advisor, Rudhir, provides spaces for lawyers, law firms, legal departments and companies to have meaningful dialogue and growth around well being, collective engagement, leadership, and business. He and his team use mindfulness-based practices to work with teams and individuals on identifying their particular challenges and finding solutions. He practiced law for 15 years, being a law firm partner with a patent litigation practice, and then worked as in house counsel for IP transactions at Apple. He ultimately transitioned to advisory work. Drawing on his prior professional experience and business principles he learned, in order to assist clients with overcoming their obstacles. We had a really interesting conversation. In it, he discusses his mindfulness-based approach to advising clients, how organizations can initiate cultural innovation, the aspects of practice that are often missed in lawyer training, and his advice for lawyer well-being in day-to-day work. It was a different kind of conversation than we usually have here at Pioneers and Pathfinders, but I think you'll enjoy it as much as I did. Thanks for listening.

Rudhir, thanks for joining us today on the podcast. I really appreciate you making the time.

## **Rudhir Krishtel**

Steven, thank you so much for having me.

## **Steve Poor**

Let's start by level setting with our listeners. Tell me about the practice.

## **Rudhir Krishtel**

So I practiced law for 15 years. I was a partner at a firm, and I was in house at Apple, and after 15 years in the practice, I noticed that the practice is challenging. It's meaningful. We pour our life and our hearts into it, and sometimes, when we focus so much on business solutions and on client needs, we may lose sight of ourselves and maybe even our teams. In the process. We're so focused on our service and helping our clients, sometimes our consumption with that, we might lose sense, sense of what we need and what our teams need. And my mind was on that. And so I left the practice about eight years ago, and I started this practice, and I have put together a team of coaches, a team of facilitators, and every day we help lawyers, law firms, legal departments and even companies, address some of their most significant challenges when it comes to their people and their teams and their personal growth. And so we work, we coach individuals, and we lead conversations with teams, with

through workshops and trainings, and we work with teams to help them really transform and evolve their culture, whether it's with their leadership, how they grow their business, taking care of themselves, their own well being and their stress, or just culture issues that come up. And we often need a place and a time for that. And we're a team of people that really creates a space for that. We focus on that.

**Steve Poor**

As you look back on your practicing lawyer days, what experiences stand out to you that you rely on for your current practice? What did you learn from that experience that's applicable to today?

**Rudhir Krishtel**

So, having practiced for 15 years, I clerked in the federal court. I was summer associate at a firm all the way through partnership, and then I was in house for five years, and I think what I learned, and I noticed, the transition to partnership, the transition to in house, and then moving to a more senior role and responsibility. The further up I got, the lonelier it felt. Always looking forward to partnership early made partnership, felt a little bit lonely. You know, it felt a little bit isolating. I had my partners, but I feel like I lost some connection with everybody else, going in house. Moving to a more senior role, I felt like the challenges were much more personable, much less relatable. At least it felt that way. And so again, the further up I went, the lonelier it felt. And that was one thing. And another thing I noticed is that with every elevation, with every promotion, with every level up, it was like a fleeting happiness. It's like you get to that point and then you just think of the next plateau, and you get to that point and you barely sit and you think of the next plateau. And so it started feeling a bit like a hamster wheel and an endless cycle.

**Steve Poor**

God, that sounds familiar.

**Rudhir Krishtel**

Yeah. So it wasn't just me. It wasn't...

**Steve Poor**

You're freaking me out. Now, what did you learn by starting your own business? How did you start by putting this team together?

**Rudhir Krishtel**

So, when I when I realized the further up I got, the lone layer I felt, I think what I realized also is that it would help to have an advisor, a confidant. You get to a point in this practice where you're actually managing a lot, you know, you are your own business. You're generating a business you're responsible for, for people, for teams, for outcomes, and for a decent amount of revenue as an individual. And so I felt the need for advisement, and I started talking to some of my other peers that were also at similar places in the practice, stepping into the partnership, moving into Deputy General Counsel, or a general counsel role. And I just realized everyone could use that private consult, that private insight, because sometimes you have colleagues, you have friends, you have people, you have community. Because you didn't get there alone, nothing of significance happens alone. So you got there with other people. And yet the challenges that I experienced felt a little bit personal. And so when I realized that I had that

challenge and some friends had that challenge, I thought, you know, I want to be that advisor. And so I left the practice, and I actually got first trained in mindfulness and yoga most out of just the personal need of evolving in those practices. I meditated every day. I practiced yoga weekly for many years, and I wanted to deepen my practice, so I trained as a mindfulness instructor and yoga instructor, but I didn't necessarily want all my clients on a yoga mat, and so I trained as a coach, I trained as a speaker, I trained as a facilitator, and I started to work with individuals and teams, realizing that we need some advisement in between the times that we're giving advice to others. And so I became that advisor. And I started out working with clients of my own, and then, you know, you do good work. People want more of it. And so I ended up building up a team. And so now, every day, you know, brick by brick, over the last seven years, we have a team of people now that are a resource to high performing individuals, mostly lawyers, mostly people that are partners or senior level roles in house, but really just a broad swath of people that are rising up into practice. And it's the high performers. Angel Reese needs a coach. Caitlin Clark needs a coach. Steph Curry needs a coach. People need advice. They need the individuals and teams need insight on how we do, how we're better at work, and we offer that. And it actually is a huge it's very meaningful because of the impact that I see and when people get better, when they're healthier, when they're more productive. When they do work that is more meaningful, I feel like everybody's happier, and it's nice to be a part of that.

### **Steve Poor**

When you started this practice, as you look back on the last eight years or so, what surprised you most? What did you learn that surprised you either about yourself or about the legal professionals you were dealing with?

### **Rudhir Krishtel**

Two things surprised me. The first is when you create that confidential space, a safe enough space, a psychologically safe space, you hear so much more than what people are comfortable sharing, typically, on teams and with colleagues. And so it's just so powerful to have a place to really think through the weeds, to really think through the complexity. You know, I work with managing partners of firms. I work with General Counsel. I work with people that have, like, very busy practices, and they, luckily, are able to share with me and talk with me about some of the most complex aspects of the practice and the people that they work with. And I really appreciate that they share with me things that I wish I could share out loud. And I think we create that opportunity, and I hear things that I never really heard in the practice, because oftentimes we hold things close to the vest. And so creating that, I think, is very it's very meaningful, because they're just parts of this practice that are really hard, and people, they create a lot of stress, and creating a space where people can actually get meaningful insight and just a place to talk goes a really long way. And on the flip side of it, I realized, after being at a place like Apple, I didn't know it at the time, but running a business, running a successful business, I realized how many business principles I learned while I was at the company that I didn't realize would be so valuable when I started and ran my own business. You know, I was on the Hill. I worked on the Hill for a year, and I worked for a congressman, and I, after a year, I hightailed it, back to the law firm. I belonged in a law firm. I didn't belong on the hill, but I remember I walked away. I felt like, you know, it was a year of my life, but I felt like I got a Master's in Public Policy. And I think when you're at a company like Apple for five years, you know, it's an MBA equivalent. You really learn a lot about how teams function, how companies function, with the importance of marketing and sales and operations and finance, and you

just really get a sense of what it means to run something successful. And I feel like I didn't appreciate that. So I was very scared starting a business, I was very nervous putting up a shingle, and then as we started to gain, you know, small and then ultimately, larger successes, I just realized I'm so grateful for that time, because I just learned a lot just by osmosis, you know, just by being in a place, I learned a lot.

**Steve Poor**

One of the interesting things I see about your practice is that it's so disparate. You've got so many disciplines embedded in your practice: mindfulness, diversity, equality, inclusion, business development, leadership, transformation. Did those come together because of your own personal interest in your own connections? Was it organic, or was it was it planned?

**Rudhir Krishtel**

It was organic and planned. It's like both. It's the lawyer answer, right, like yes, yes, and all of it. And I think what's organic is what I needed the most was mindfulness. Got more senior in the practice. Things become more stressful, and the number one tool was learning to breathe, learning to slow down, learning to get clear. More important than the expertise and the experience. At some point, the expertise and the experience were table stakes, with the ability to just be present. Understand what the challenge is. Have your head on your shoulders, feel comfortable in a room full of executives and stressed people, and just be the level head, I think, is just so meaningful. And so the mindfulness practices and the mindfulness based approach, I think, is the foundation, the cornerstone. And then when you can be more mindful, you can transform and you can grow. You can be more successful in business growth. You can be more thoughtful about the people around you, the culture, the diversifying workforce and the teams. You can just be more thoughtful about them. You can invest in your growth, and you can grow a business. And so all of these things, I think, for me, a mindfulness based approach, has led to huge transformation for the people that we work with, which is just slowing down and paying attention versus, you know, it's slowing down to speed up. How often do we trip and fall and fail when we're in a rush? And I think we just allow people to slow down and experiment and try new things. And we've just seen so much growth having a mindfulness based approach.

**Steve Poor**

Wow, that's fascinating. One of the components of your practice is also expertise in diversity and equity and inclusion in our current environment that's got to be a challenging issue to deal with your clients. How have you seen that change in the in the past few months?

**Rudhir Krishtel**

Well, first, if you care about people and you care about teams, and you care about culture, and you care about our diversifying world. You know, it's been challenging for decades, and so it's not ever challenging for months. You know, I've been rolling up my sleeves and doing this work since college and law school and early and it was, you know, at some point the word diversity was ignored. Right, early in my legal career, people didn't pay attention to it, and at some point it gains traction and attention, and it can then have a response and a reaction. And so today, we're in a reactive place. It's funny that we complain about being in a reactive place. And a little while ago, we were in a place where there was no attention. It felt like no attention at all, you know. And so what we really care about, what I

really care about, is making sure that everyone has a path to success. Everyone has a path to being a part of a culture. Everyone has an opportunity to contribute, and that organizations run, you know, thoughtfully and ethically and with really just, just outcomes all around. And I think that's possible. We all know that to be possible. We think about it. We want it. And so even in this moment when we face walls and we face challenges, we face push back. You know, I think if you're interested in a team and a world where everybody has an opportunity to succeed and achieve, and that even when they achieve power corrupts. And so we want an environment that is ethical. We want an environment that is thoughtful. We want an environment that allows everyone to thrive. And if you're for that and it's important to you, then you have to know that something that's important to you and that you care about, and that's meaningful, some people are going to have issues with and I think it makes it that much more. You know, the things that we're most proud of are the things that we fought through, that we face challenge and adversity. People don't talk about at parties, being three feet back from the edge of the diving board. You know? We talk about being at the edge. We talk about the moments that were uncomfortable and how we endured. And so we don't talk about Easy Street, right? We talk about the hard things. And so I think when people in the world makes things hard, I think for those of us that have been in this conversation for a really long time, we know that everything that we are in for that matters has ups and downs, and we're here for it.

### **Steve Poor**

We talk a lot about innovation in the practice, in the profession these days, and most of the conversation turns around technological advances, generative AI, and all that kind of stuff. But I think what's overlooked is a conversation about cultural transformation, cultural innovation. Have you ever walked into a law firm, a legal department, and said these people are doing something really unique in terms of cultural innovation, and that can really change things?

### **Rudhir Krishtel**

The organizations that do that feel comfortable pivoting and pivoting often. They feel comfortable listening to people. They feel comfortable with experimentation. The thing with law firms, it's natural we identify risk for the world, and so then some of us gain a risk aversion, but the folks that tend to do the best work are the ones that are comfortable taking small risks, experimenting in small ways. We don't want to risk client outcomes. We don't want to risk missing or meeting the deadline, but what we do want to take experimentation with is what makes our people tick, what they need today, because what we needed today is actually different than five years ago and different than five years before. That, in some ways and in other ways, a lot stays the same. You know what motivates people? What gets people going? What fires people up? Wanting to do meaningful work, wanting to be appreciated and valued, wanting to feel challenged, wanting to get a pat on the back for a meaningful effort, and some of us stayed up all night at firms for day after day after day and never complained about it once. And that doesn't stop, you know, people really want to do good work, and yet they want to do it in, you know, some ways are the same, and sometimes some things are different. And so the folks that I think succeed and the organizations that I feel like are most valued are the ones that pay attention, you know, week by week, quarter by quarter, and are able to experiment in small ways that are meaningful to their talent and to their teams. And when they do that, they're able to keep up. They're able to stay ahead.

**Steve Poor**

You mentioned some things are different. Does it change what you're looking for in a lawyer and the skill set? Does it change what we ought to be teaching in law schools: this different mix of skills and different mixes of careers?

**Rudhir Krishtel**

Completely. Because I think as humans and people, we evolve, and so our ability to understand and learn and grow evolves. And then we start realizing, you know, Stephen, you realized in the practice that there's some things that you we do that are amazing, and some things that you just kind of scratch your head around. Why do we keep doing that?

**Steve Poor**

I've noticed, yeah.

**Rudhir Krishtel**

So those things we want to train on now. We didn't learn these things in law school, you know, back then or early on, and we have an opportunity to do that now. And, you know, small examples and large, take one thing: trial. The number of cases that we litigate, some of us in the practice, and we do it over and over again, but it's very interesting. So many teams don't do a post mortem on a deal or a trial, and I think I realized part of it is that we don't want to sit in a room and point out where we messed up, because we're pointing out where people messed up, and I don't think we can handle that on the teams, but there's this opportunity for a non judgmental post mortem. You know, we're not here pointing fingers, but there's no way for us to get better without us taking a pause and reflecting. That's something that we can evolve and get better on the practice. We do a lot of conversations on how to be better at giving feedback. There's so much resistance on having an honest conversation, because we worry about the fallout. We worry about how this might affect me being able to staff teams. We worry about whether or not that person will leave. And so we can train on how to get better, how to better receive information, how to better share information, how to do it more frequently. And so there's things that we can train on. We have so much stress in the practice, I think the most valuable lawyers are the ones that stay in the practice and are seasoned 50s and their 60s, and later on in our career, it's when we have the most valuable insight, the strongest relationships with opposing counsel and with judges and with the community. And so you have that insight, but there's so much burnout mid career for so many people. And so we don't teach resilience early in the practice we could we don't teach, you know what we teach? We teach deposition skills. And we have people that are really good taking depositions. We teach trial skills. And, you know we have, we have people that really are great at trial. So then we can teach these other things. We can have lawyers that are good in business communications and being business leaders. We can have lawyers that are great with finance and understanding the outcomes of firms and companies. We can have lawyers that are just have greater resilience, are able to be better about leveraging, delegating, creating teams with structure and offering more balance in the practice. It's just that we didn't train on that in law school or early in our apprenticeship. We're so focused on hours and expertise that sometimes we miss out on other aspects of the practice that are also important. And so I think we want to evolve. We want to get better, and we can, and training and teaching is so much easier now than it was before. There's so many tools and ways for us to learn. And so I think there's just, I'm very hopeful. I feel like there's a lot of opportunity. It strikes me as I'm listening

to you talk that that type of training becomes even more important in an era where technology is advancing into the practice and picking up some of the routine matters and taking away some of the tactical skills people learned. These human skills become more predominant. If you want somebody to be a great counselor that they learn by 50 or 60, you want to accelerate that into their 20s and 30s and 40s. It strikes me the type of training you're talking about becomes more important early in someone's career. Right, or at least equally valuable, so insight, intuition, looking around corners, strategic thinking, understanding, nuance, depth. It's the gaps that I see in technology right now. We're always surprised what technology is able to do. It hits us like a brick the first time we use chat GPT, I used it, you know, right when it came out, the day it came out, or day or after it came out, I had an account, and I was floored, and I started to realize the gaps of what it's paying attention to, what it's understanding, what it's really able to look ahead to, and how much it's able to actually accomplish. And do we still need doers. We still need people offering advice on the spot. We still need, you know, insight and moments. And some of the work that we do is so complex that I'm not sure, you know, I think there's so many things that the algorithms and the generative AI can accomplish, and then I also just see people, and I just know that there's so many things that we're able to pay attention to and adapt to in a moment. So I have a lot of faith in our community and in our workplace. And there's different skills. It's not just rote memorization, it's not just a few experiences, but there's deeper human skill sets that I think we want to expand on and learn and learn to practice and start to flex muscles on, because I think it helps us just be better as service providers.

### **Steve Poor**

When you're brought in to help an organization transform itself, change its culture, become more a high performing team. What are the typical barriers you encounter, and how do you overcome them? Because you're dealing with lawyers that think they're perfect and are resistant to change, so it must cause you must have found some techniques to overcome that.

### **Rudhir Krishtel**

Oh, certainly. And I think willingness to learn and grow is such a baseline, valuable quality and characteristic, you know, I think you know, you can take a horse to water, and we have the space, we have the environment, we have the tools, we have the success stories. You want people that are willing. And so we have a group coaching program on business development. That's just one example of one of the things that we love doing. But on the front end, we ask a question is, how motivated are you to be in this class? And there's a minimum answer below which we actually have a hard conversation with you or the firm that's sponsoring you, and say, I'm not so sure, because this person doesn't seem that motivated. We want motivated people. Leaders have to be motivated to get better, to change, to evolve, and that's the people that we tend to have the most success with, and which is a lot of success, because we work with individuals. We work with teams. We think about the challenges that people tend to have on their teams and their culture. We understand what those challenges are, and then we make meaningful, measurable changes over time, over the six months, over a year, over multiple years, working with people, and you can actually, literally see measurably what the changes in terms of how teams function, how they interact, how people are, and how much better they are in business and in The practice, but the hardest thing is someone who's unwilling and so doubt, doubt is something we face a lot people have doubt, skepticism because we're in a practice where there's a lot

of critical thinkers, and we have a lot of tools to work with that, because we want people to feel what's possible when they invest in themselves and they invest in others.

**Steve Poor**

You've had really a amazingly diverse career. What's next? Where do you see the next challenge coming for you and for the company?

**Rudhir Krishtel**

We want to impact and support as many people as possible? I think, as I mentioned before, I think this practice is best served when people stick around in it. That's when we get the best advice, and it can be hard for a lot of people. There's a lot of challenges, a lot of road bumps, and there's burnout, and there's people that lose their energy. And we want to create systems and solutions that allow people to thrive. I've heard from no less than 50 people that we work with, "You helped me find my freedom."

**Steve Poor**

That's very powerful.

**Rudhir Krishtel**

It's not a word that we use often, and to hear it from that many people helps me appreciate, understand that we have systems and ways that allow people to feel autonomy, control, personal freedom and fulfillment in this practice. And the people that have worked with us for some time, they're in it for the next many decades. They're fired up, they're excited, they're energized. They have time, they have space, and they're willing to make a meaningful commitment. And I think that's possible for a lot of people, and I think that's what I want to do in the next many years, is impact as many people as we possibly can, because that's what makes me happy. It's what makes our team get fulfilled. We have a team full of people that are extremely happy, extremely energized, extremely fulfilled by this work, and we're very hungry to help as many people as we can, help as many teams and organizations as we can. And so that's what's ahead.

**Steve Poor**

That's great. I want to pick up on something you said, some of the characteristics of people who result from working with you are those the characteristics you look for? Someone who's leading a high performing team? Are there other characteristics you try to teach to get people to be effective leaders? Because high performing teams are a key component of the practice.

**Rudhir Krishtel**

The further up we go in the practice...Remember, I mentioned it earlier, is the further up we go, the longer it feels the other thing that's just true is that power corrupts. There's this really good book that I love. It's by Dacher Keltner. It's called The Power Paradox. And you know, usually in these business self help books, there's like, a single page that, like, really sticks with you, and the rest of it falls by the wayside. And the page, or the image that really sticks with me is that early on in our career, we use empathy, understanding, collaboration, teamwork, and all these collective qualities to succeed, and then as soon as we get to a point of success, what we start to lose is our empathy, our collaboration, our teamwork, and our understanding. And so, it's just really interesting is that the path to success is



collective, but the path to maintaining keeping power is very isolating, like holding on to something. And I think the thing that I've learned and I've seen is, you know, shortest poem in English, record: Me, we. It's Muhammad Ali. He said this in a speech: Me, we. And so powerful when we remind people about what's bigger than themselves, when we remind people about the power of teams, the power of something as simple as delegating, teaching, training, connecting, investing in others. And leaders, when they get that reminder and they're offered really simple systems on how to invest in teams and how to invest in others and how to really expand their footprint and their impact. You know, we remind people that not a single thing of significance ever happened alone.

### **Steve Poor**

That's great. That's a great point. Last question before I let you go. So people who take on leadership roles sometimes are resistant to being coached. They feel that it's a perhaps an implicit criticism of their ability to do the job, or something along those lines. How do you communicate to them that they ought to at least consider talking to a coach? You ought to consider getting some assistance as they move into new positions.

### **Rudhir Krishtel**

It's interesting you say that. I personally coach managing partners of firms, people that hold significant books of business practice, group leaders, partners, partners, on the path to equity, and then we have a team of coaches, and we work with associates and senior associates moving up. And it's very hard to express, I need help. I need help. It's very hard. But we work with the people that articulate to someone that they need some support, whether it's someone at the firm or even reaching out to us directly, and it's always confidential, it's always secure, but that outreach is the starting point. The one thing we don't do is what is remedial work, the problem person, the challenge. Because again, when you're approaching something with resistance, you're just getting less apt to learn the thing. And so I think that it takes a certain level of humility and self awareness to just say, I think I need some help. I just and we need that help. We need to learn deposition skills, we learn to learn trial skills, we need to learn management skills, we need to learn leadership skills. And so at every stage, I just feel like new level, new devil. And no matter where you go, there's always going to be some growth opportunity. And so I just appreciate people that appreciate, reflect on that know that they need it. Once you're told and you're forced into something, it's much harder. And so we work with the people that reach out, you know, like I said, Caitlin Clark needs a coach, you know, Steph Curry needs a coach. And the best of us need support and help, and it can feel isolating, but as soon as you reach out and you ping us, or you're paying a colleague and say, I need someone, you know, someone's going to connect. Going to connect you up with the right resources, us or anybody. And we want people to have that comfort and growing capacity to do it. And I think the leaders that are the most successful, most of them, you know, when you ask them personally, you know they have a coach, they have some support, they have some resource. And we want to offer that to folks.

### **Steve Poor**

As we wrap up, any final piece of advice for lawyers who want to lead with more intention or just want to feel better in their day to day work.

### **Rudhir Krishtel**

I think we overthink what we can do in a year, and we underestimate what we can do in a decade. And so I just invite people to slow down, pay attention, get more thoughtful, get more intentional. And just like so many people we work with, you will be surprised at what you can accomplish in time as you're intentional and you invest in yourself and you invest in this practice.

**Steve Poor**

For our listeners, where can people find you if they want to follow your work or bring you into their organizations?

**Rudhir Krishtel**

Krishtel.com is our website. And LinkedIn, just reach out, connect. We'll touch base, we'll chat, and we'll find a way to help.

**Steve Poor**

Fabulous. Thanks again for making the time. I really appreciate it was a fascinating conversation.

**Rudhir Krishtel**

Thanks, Stephen. Really appreciate it.

**Steve Poor**

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