Andy Crissinger:	00:00	Hi there everyone. Andy Crissinger here. I'm the Director of Coaching at Reboot. And I'm here with my colleague, Chris VandenBrink. And Chris has been the Director of our Peer Group program at Reboot for a number of years and, uh, teaches the content that we're going to be sharing with you today. And the topic of today's podcast snippet is inquiry. Inquiry as a leadership skill. And we want to start by first just establishing what, what inquiry is, and why we see it as, uh, an incredibly central and important leadership skill, but one that's often overlooked or, um, not emphasized as much, um, in the world of leadership.
Andy Crissinger:	00:50	So, uh, Chris, maybe we can start by talking about inquiry, how would you define it? How would you explain the concept of inquiry? And then we can talk a little bit about why it's important as a leadership skill.
Chris VandenBri...:	01:01	Yeah. Thanks for having me too Andy. Um, so to begin, in its most general way of describing it, inquiry is asking questions.
Andy Crissinger:	01:11	Hmm, mm-hmm (affirmative).
Chris VandenBri...:	01:11	Right? In contrast to making a statement, or a declaration, in which there's no question mark at the end. In inquiry, there is information that we do not have that we use a question to get to.
Andy Crissinger:	01:28	But aren't leaders supposed to have all the answers?
Chris VandenBri...:	01:30	(laughs).
Andy Crissinger:	01:30	Why would a leader be doing that? (laughs).
Chris VandenBri...:	01:37	(laughs). Yes, well, this is the thing, leaders don't have all the answers. And this is where inquiry becomes a pretty important tool in their [crosstalk 00:01:45].
Andy Crissinger:	01:44	Yeah, so let's talk a little bit more about that. I mean, this is often, we call this you know, one of the most central but under utilized leadership skills. So why would a leader want this skill?
Chris VandenBri...:	01:58	Yeah. So before even getting into that I think it's important to, um, kind of talk about the different types of inquiry that, that a leader might engage in.
Andy Crissinger:	02:07	Yeah.

Chris VandenBri...:	02:08	So when we're talking about asking questions, there's different types of questions, right? There are what we call closed probe questions, which are yes or no questions, or either or questions.
Andy Crissinger:	02:21	Hmm.
Chris VandenBri...:	02:21	In which they're looking, the leader might be looking for one of a few responses. And then there's open questions in which the, the line of inquiry is more about discovering new information they didn't have before.
Andy Crissinger:	02:35	Right, right.
Chris VandenBri...:	02:36	And this is gets to the heart of why a leader might want to lean into inquiry, is when they know the answer, or they know the question that they need an answer for, or the information they're looking for, perhaps closed probes can be useful. But in these situations, or these environments in which we don't have the answer, we don't even know what the right direction to go is, can be really helpful to lean into open inquiry, open and honest questions.
Andy Crissinger:	03:01	Yeah, yeah. So maybe just to build on that, in situations where we're dealing with high degrees of complexity, perhaps, where there's not a clearly defined right way to be doing something, perhaps where, um, what's needed is, is innovation, um, m- more complex problem solving. Um, these are all areas where inquiry as a leadership skill will be quite important. And then we've also spoken in other places about the concept of psychological safety.
Chris VandenBri...:	03:30	Yeah.
Andy Crissinger:	03:31	And that if the leader is always speaking from a place of certainty, uh, that doesn't make it really safe for others to ask questions or not have the answers. Just kind of modeling a behavior that we speak from a place of already having figured it out.
Chris VandenBri...:	03:46	Yeah.
Andy Crissinger:	03:47	Um, which can, unfortunately, reinforce the kind of behavior that is, um, if I'm confused, I don't speak up. Um, if I see per- perhaps, uh, we- we're about to, you know, uh, drive this thing off a cliff so to speak, I see a big problem, uh, there, I might not speak up, uh, because, um, the leader seems quite certain and, uh, you know, don't want to challenge that.

Andy Crissinger:	04:12	So there's all sorts of things that a leader only speaking with certainty and from a place of advocacy and not modeling inquiry can actually keep really valuable information from finding its way out of silos and into the sort of the, the general knowledge base.
Chris VandenBri...:	04:30	That's exactly the word that I was thinking of, is that it can create the conditions where it's not safe to say, "I don't have the answer," and perhaps not work across the, across teams and create that silo effect, right? So it can really, uh, harm the flow of information in an organization.
Andy Crissinger:	04:49	Right, right. Um, I wonder if we might go a little bit further then and ground this in some of the, the real life examples that we see with our clients and, uh, maybe share just a bit from our work, uh, directly with clients and client organizations. What are some of the ways that we see an inability or, or an underdeveloped ability to, to really do inquiry well, showing up in our client work? And, uh, what, what are the impacts of that?
Chris VandenBri...:	05:16	Yeah, where, where I see, where I see it show up the most is when a client is really struggling with what they think the intentions of someone else on their team are.
Andy Crissinger:	05:27	Hmm, mm-hmm (affirmative).
Chris VandenBri...:	05:27	Right? Where they think, "Oh, this person just wants to undercut me or doesn't think I can get to the right solution." And they're saying all of these comments, these statements about what the other person is thinking without actually knowing what the other person is thinking.
Andy Crissinger:	05:43	Hmm, mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah.
Chris VandenBri...:	05:44	Right? They've, uh, jumped to a conclusion that, that, uh, may or may not be true and likely isn't true. However, we get into these cycles, these ruts of thinking and feeling where it becomes difficult to move out of it and not see the conclusion that we've jumped to.
Andy Crissinger:	06:01	Yeah, yeah.
Chris VandenBri...:	06:02	And these moments are incredibly, uh, valuable to bring inquiry and especially open and honest inquiry into the equation.

Andy Crissinger:	06:10	Yep, yep. Okay, so the way I paraphrase that might be in situations where we become over reliant on unchecked assumptions.
Chris VandenBri...:	06:19	Yeah.
Andy Crissinger:	06:19	Uh, often about th- that have to do with the motivations or intentions of others that we're working with. That's an area where to be able to have access to inquiry, to be able to do that, well, can help us, um-
Chris VandenBri...:	06:34	Yep.
Andy Crissinger:	06:35	... Another thing that I think about is, um, with leaders who are trying to, to build capacity in other members of their team, perhaps direct reports. Um, if we fall into a trap where we think, okay, my job with this person is actually to, to always be telling them how to do their job, always be telling them the right way to solve the problems that are in front of them, kind of-
Chris VandenBri...:	06:59	Hmm.
Andy Crissinger:	07:00	... [inaudible 00:07:00] sort of the ... uh, almost like supporting through teaching only. Now there certainly is a time to be directive, and there's definitely a time to teach, particularly when people are, have never done a, a, a thing before or have never faced a particular kind of challenge before, can be helpful to teach and direct from that place of more experience. But often to only be doing that we're not actually calling the other person into their, uh, uh, into their resourcefulness, and into their agency, um, to, to the point where they might actually be finding solutions to problems that we could have never thought of. So to not be leaning into inquiries just to be creating a dependency on, on us as the leaders to have the right answers and tell people how to think.
Chris VandenBri...:	07:45	Absolutely. And a slight build is the idea of scaling an organization-
Andy Crissinger:	07:51	Right, right.
Chris VandenBri...:	07:51	... and tying that to... Like scaling is not just hiring more people that are going to be automatons to implement the work. Scaling is all about hiring people that can learn to think for themselves and solve the challenges-
Andy Crissinger:	08:05	Right.

Chris VandenBri...:	08:05	... in new f, in new frontiers.
Andy Crissinger:	08:07	Right.
Chris VandenBri...:	08:07	And inquiry as a means or a mechanism to scale is incredibly valuable.
Andy Crissinger:	08:13	Right, absolutely, yeah. And I, and I might just share one other thing, I'll borrow a phrase from Ed Schein, the humble inquiry on the part of a leader actually can help contribute to, uh, a sense of psychological safety on the part of others with less positional power and less positional authority. Because the leader is actually modeling a kind of vulnerability that says, implicitly, "I don't have all the answers, and I need to rely on others in this system to help fill in a fuller picture here, to help contribute to, uh, the work that we're doing together."
Andy Crissinger:	09:01	And that modeling from the person with more positional authority then makes it safe for others to do the same.
Chris VandenBri...:	09:06	Yeah.
Andy Crissinger:	09:06	And so again, we have freer information flow, we have, uh, maybe less siloing happening, uh, o- on, you know, on the part of the organization.
Chris VandenBri...:	09:19	And to tie that to one more component that I think is really important to name is, inquiry is not just for us to use on other people, can also be incredibly helpful to get curious about what's going on for us in situations as well-
Andy Crissinger:	09:35	Yes, yeah, yeah.
Chris VandenBri...:	09:37	... right? Like, I, I wonder why it's so important for me to feel like I have the answers all the time. When we know, especially in this time that, that just can't be possible. So isn't that interesting, and what's going on for me?
Andy Crissinger:	09:50	Yes, yep, absolutely. Yeah, I mean, it's the, it's the life of, of curiosity, it's the life of self actualization, uh, to be turning that curiosity inward back on ourselves. In fact, probably is the very first move we should be making with inquiry-
Chris VandenBri...:	10:05	Absolutely.
Andy Crissinger:	10:06	... uh, before we tend to use it as a tool, uh, to support others. You know, I'm, I'm reminded of a quote that we often reference

from our teacher, Parker Palmer, uh, where he's talking about, uh, Socrates saying the, the unexamined life is not worth living. And, uh, he adds to that, and if you choose to live an unexamined life, be sure to choose a job that doesn't involve working with other people. Which, uh, you know I think is a good reminder for, for leaders that the self examination, the self inquiry, uh, should actually proceed all, all of our other outward work as leaders.

Andy Crissinger:	11:08	So if a leader listens to this and says, "You know what? You-you've convinced me. I wa, I need to up my game in the inquiry department, I'd like to get better at that." Maybe let's close with some practical ways that, uh, folks can begin practicing this skill and developing it.
Chris VandenBri...:	11:30	Yeah. So tying back to the, the differences of types of questions, right? There's closed probes, and then there's more open and honest questions. When we're leaning into those open and honest inquiries, something that's really important to do is notice that, notice how our question is going to either co, expand or contract the possibilities for the person.
Andy Crissinger:	11:54	Hmm.
Chris VandenBri...:	11:54	Right?
Andy Crissinger:	11:55	Mm-hmm (affirmative).
Chris VandenBri...:	11:55	So if we start with either this or either that we're probably not in the open and honest realm, right?
Andy Crissinger:	12:02	Right. We're calling forth a binary response, yes or no, right?
Chris VandenBri...:	12:06	Yep, we're calling forth that, that limited amount of options versus an expanded amount of options, right?
Andy Crissinger:	12:13	Yeah.
Chris VandenBri...:	12:13	And some of the words that we might track that will let us know whether we're in open and honest mode is what, how, where and when.
Andy Crissinger:	12:24	Hmm, yeah. So kind of the journalist questions but without why.
Chris VandenBri...:	12:30	Without why.
Andy Crissinger:	12:32	Yeah, yeah.

Chris VandenBri...:	12:33	Why is that so? It's because the question why, often evokes a defensive response in the, in the one being questioned-
Andy Crissinger:	12:44	Right.
Chris VandenBri...:	12:44	... and wi- will, will tend to get a story that helps them rationalize their behavior, versus actual open data about what's really going on in their thought process.
Andy Crissinger:	12:55	Hmm, mm-hmm (affirmative). So, uh, perhaps, uh, a way, let, we'll give an example. Say we're in a product review meeting. And I'm, I'm the, I'm the lead, I'm the manager in that meeting, and I'm really curious about why one of my team members, um, spent their time last week working on this particular, uh, aspect of the product and not, uh, maybe what, what we'd agreed upon in the roadmap, I could say, "Why did you spend your time last week doing that?"
Chris VandenBri...:	13:27	Mm-hmm (affirmative).
Andy Crissinger:	13:28	Which would, um, which is a fair question in a sense, in spirit, but it's probably going to put that person on their, on their back foot, and, and encourage them to kind of spin up a rationalization for their behavior. But if I wanted to transform that question into more of a open, honest question, how might I reword that?
Chris VandenBri...:	13:47	Yeah. To me, what comes up is, "What were you trying to accomplish last week?" Or, "What was, what was the goal of this action that you took?"
Andy Crissinger:	13:55	Right, yeah.
Chris VandenBri...:	13:56	Right.
Andy Crissinger:	13:57	Yeah, so it's more open. It's, it's, it's actually expanding the conversation. It's, um, it's asking the person to, to speak from their, from their experience as opposed to a story about their experience.
Chris VandenBri...:	14:11	Yeah.
Andy Crissinger:	14:13	Or a rationalization, yeah.
Chris VandenBri...:	14:14	And then a, a quick build is that the answer to that question will more like, will, will more likely shed light on a gap of

information that perhaps this person needs in order to succeed in that project, right?

Andy Crissinger:	14:27	Right, right, yeah.
Chris VandenBri...:	14:29	Which is you as a leader then builds those, uh, trust resonant circuits with that employee.
Andy Crissinger:	14:35	Yeah, yeah, yeah. Uh, so what, what else might a l, a leader who's wanting to work on this skill want to pay attention to?
Chris VandenBri...:	14:46	So another thing to pay attention to is what part of the situation or experience are you focusing on? Are you focusing on the problem or the person? Right?
Andy Crissinger:	14:59	Hmm.
Chris VandenBri...:	15:00	Because oftentimes we focus just on the problem. And when we're focusing just on the problem, the intent often there is to fix or solve it for the person, right?
Andy Crissinger:	15:11	Hmm, mm-hmm (affirmative).
Chris VandenBri...:	15:11	Which further reinforces their inability to solve it on their own. Whereas if we can shift slightly our attention to both the problem and the person, right? Which is gets to that question of like, "What were you trying to accomplish last week?"
Andy Crissinger:	15:29	Yeah.
Chris VandenBri...:	15:30	Then we shift the focus to where it should be, which is on the agency of the person. Right?
Andy Crissinger:	15:37	Right, yeah. So building on that concept of questions focusing on the person versus simply the, the thing or the problem. Um, sometimes if we want to practice inquiry, what we might find ourselves doing is just asking a bunch of questions about, uh, the plot, right? What happened? (laughs) Or what is happening? Um, so, but when you, when Chris talks about focusing on the person, the, the questions then become a way of helping me and the other person explore their own mental models and how they're experiencing the problem.
Andy Crissinger:	18:00	And so there's appropriate times to explore "the thing", the problem, or the, the "it," so to speak. And then there are other times where if my goal is really to help this, this person that I'm leading develop, um, um, more resiliency, uh, deeper, uh, critical thinking or an ability to kind of move through this

problem in their, in their own kind of creative ways, then I want to be asking questions that get to their experience, and how they're thinking about the problem.

Chris VandenBri...:	18:31	Yeah.
Andy Crissinger:	18:32	And so that's, that's really super helpful and helpful nuance, I think.
Chris VandenBri...:	18:36	Yeah, and, and it might be as simple as shifting the, as a leader the internal question from, what is the right answer, right? That you're going to have a comparison yes or no kind of in a binary way too, to where is this person getting stuck?
Andy Crissinger:	18:50	Yeah, that's a great, that's a great thing. Where's this person getting stuck? Yeah.
Chris VandenBri...:	18:54	Yeah.
Andy Crissinger:	18:58	Yeah. Anything else that we'd want to say to leaders who are stepping into this skill set?
Chris VandenBri...:	19:04	Yeah, one last thing that comes to mind is, there's been a lot of research about asking questions, and it seems like the thing that we should all do. And sometimes I see leaders think that what they need to do is ask a question, but they've disguised what they really want to do, which is make a direct statement as a question.
Andy Crissinger:	19:25	Uh, yeah, yeah.
Chris VandenBri...:	19:28	And I just want to na- name that, if what you want to do is make a statement, or have a direct, make a directive, then that's what should be done.
Andy Crissinger:	19:40	Yes, yes. Yeah, I, just to build on that, I see a lot of times leaders, almost using questions as a more polite way to give directives.
Chris VandenBri...:	19:49	Yes, yeah.
Andy Crissinger:	19:49	And that's not what we're talking about here.
Chris VandenBri...:	19:52	Yeah.
Andy Crissinger:	19:52	You know, it's, it's if you're, if you want to advocate, advocate, if it's time to inquire, inquire, but don't misunderstand what we're

saying here that, hey, this is really just about being nicer in your communication.

| Chris VandenBri...: | 20:04 | Exactly. |

Andy Crissinger: 20:06 It's not what this is about at all. So don't use inquiry as a way to soften direction. It's just, i- it's just a different skill.

Chris VandenBri...: 20:14 Yeah.

Andy Crissinger: 20:15 It's a different tool in your toolkit to be used.

Chris VandenBri...: 20:20 Yeah, and, and one, one last thing is, um, the, it's, it's a n, for some of us, it's a new skill altogether, that we might not get right on the first time, and that's okay, right? One of the, the goals here is to start, is to notice that you, there is another tool that you can draw from, and to start practicing it, because the more you do it, the better you'll get.

Andy Crissinger: 20:44 Yeah, I think that's a perfect note for us to end on, is just to begin to practice. Uh, maybe even find someone that can, that can partner with you, and give you some feedback as you're, uh, trying to, to engage in this new skill. And, uh, hopefully, this will be an additional tool in your toolkit that's in service of you and your team and the work that you're trying to do together. All right. Thanks, Chris.

Chris VandenBri...: 21:12 Thanks, Andy.