Andy Crissinger:	00:04	Hi everybody. Andy Crissinger here, Director of Coaching and Reboot. And I'm here today with my colleague Ali Schultz, co-founder of Reboot and Coach and facilitator Ali, it's good to be with you today.
Ali Schultz:	00:16	Hi everybody, good to be here.
Andy Crissinger:	00:20	And today we're talking about this topic of psychological safety and trust in teams. And this is a term psychological safety that is I think becoming more and more, um, prevalent and in the awareness of folks as we think about how teams work and what makes teams successful. Many of you are probably familiar with the now famous study that Google did, looking at what are the factors that make teams successful within their organization.
Andy Crissinger:	00:47	And psychological safety was right at the top of the list of the conditions that were present when teams were high performing and successful. And so, we also see this to be incredibly important, um, in the work that we do with clients. And often one of those areas that leaders struggle with.
Andy Crissinger:	01:09	And so, before we talk about some of the ways that leaders can deal more skillfully, um, with the creation of psychological safety in teams, let's just define our terms first. So simply put, when we talk about psychological safety, we're talking about the absence of interpersonal fear. And I really appreciate the work of Amy Edmondson in this space. Uh, she wrote a great book, The Fearless Organization, I highly recommend that one for leaders. And, and she talks about how psychological safety isn't maybe what we would typically think, think it is just by the, the terminology.
Andy Crissinger:	03:22	Like, Oh, it's, maybe it's about being nice or maybe it's about a lower performance standards in a group. Um, it's not those things at all. It's simply that we're not afraid of, uh, danger in our interpersonal relationships. It's a lack of interpersonal fear, uh, in the workplace. It, it still can coincide with high performance standards. It still can coincide with candor, um, solid feedback.
Andy Crissinger:	03:52	All of these things that are also important for high performing teams, but it just means that our people aren't constantly walking around worried about their place in the group or their relative status to others in the group. And so, we're gonna unpack that a little bit more today. We're going to talk about some ways that leaders can be, um, aware of this concept, can work skillfully with the concept and, um, try to make this as practical as we can.

Andy Crissinger:	04:19	But before we do that, uh, one of the things that I want to invite Ali to speak to is, um, the helpful metaphor that we've actually found in looking at horses. And Ali is a horse woman. Ali has been around horses all her life and she's been, uh, trained in also using horses for, uh, facilitative coaching work. And so, I really would love for her to speak a little bit about, um, horses or the herd of horses as a metaphor for the way human systems work.
Andy Crissinger:	04:54	And so, Ali, maybe we can just talk a little bit about, first of all, why, what makes horses such a great metaphor or great, uh, you know, learning, um, uh, learning tool for us when we think about how the human herd, so to speak, functions?
Ali Schultz:	05:13	Yeah. So the horses like a 1200 pound, um, bundle of mirror neurons and that part of their evolutionary history has been part of their, um, success as a species. And, um, it also makes them incredibly sensitive, um, animals and looking at the herd structure and how they are as individuals functioning together in groups, um, and maintaining, um, not only individual and group success, um, as they move forward in their fairly simple days, um, but still avoiding obviously, being eaten and killed, um, in the animal world because they are prey animals.
Ali Schultz:	06:18	Um, is it like they provide this fascinating model of, of how, um, we can really start thinking about how are human herds operate and how we are within our human herds.
Andy Crissinger:	06:37	I've had the privilege of doing this work with you before and, and with groups and often just for our listeners, there'll be, the setup is we'll be in an arena, there is a herd of horses, you know, maybe, um, seven to 10, maybe a little bit more and say a group of, of 12 of us. And one of the things you'll have us do is, begin to move out among the herd. And just notice the way that the horses position themselves. And you'll talk a lot about that spatial awareness and, and within the group, and maybe you could just say a word or two of what it is that we can learn as we move through the herd in that way.
Ali Schultz:	07:19	Yeah. So, um, that's one of my favorite, um, exercises actually is to just kind of put the people out with the horses and see what happens. Um, but the invitation in those moments is really, um, you know, to go find your place in the herd. And there's a lot, um, that happens in that moment because, um, we start locating our human feeling bodies and our spatial awareness amongst these, um, animals who orient their whole way of being, as a large kind of bubbles of perception with each other.

Ali Schultz:	08:07	And so for the horse, um, boundaries are, um, critically important. I would say. If you just look at how an individual horse is, um, oriented in their life, um, there's like a bubble of space around them and that bubble of space is not just a personal space bubble like what you experienced at a party, um, when somebody's standing a little bit too close and you really don't like it.
Ali Schultz:	08:37	It's a literally key to their survival and um, I mean they, they are praying animals so they are, um, constantly looking out to their environment and each other, um, to, to check, you know, am I safe here and am I safe with you?
Andy Crissinger:	09:02	Kinda like humans, right?
Ali Schultz:	09:04	Very much like humans. The thing I love about working with the horses is that we start seeing their way of being as a fully embodied way of being and it's such a large way because that's all they have for languages is body language and we see it in such a gross, overt, amplified way. And yet we humans have the exact same capability and same parts of our nervous system that value really the same things.
Ali Schultz:	09:43	We value rapport. We need to feel like we're safe. We need to feel like we belong. We need to know where our place is in our respective human herds, whether it's a herd of two or a herd of, you know, a company the size of a thousand employees. Um, so there's a lot that the horse as an individual and as a herd can really model for us, um, in our organizations I think, especially as it relates to psychological safety.
Andy Crissinger:	10:18	Yeah. You know, as you were talking about that, one of them, one of the coolest moments that, and this has happened several times and we have, I've been witness to you doing this work with groups. One of the coolest moments for me is when all the, the human group has interspersed among the herd and the herd is spaced out and there can be these moments of, uh, extreme calm and stillness where the herd is completely still, the humans among the herd are completely still.
Andy Crissinger:	10:52	And if it's hard to describe with words, the feeling that that gives, that that gave me in my, in my body, the feeling of calm when it's sort of like you talk about boundaries, everyone knows their place and everyone feels safe and steady in that place. And the sense of boundaries is, "Oh, I'm here, you're there, we're here together and this is okay." And, and you sort of feel that in

your neurology, when you get to experience it, you feel it in all of you, your spirit, your soul.

Andy Crissinger:	11:27	It's, it's pretty amazing. And so, um, so, so part of what the herd can teach us, I'm hearing you say, is the importance of for psychological safety, that sense of, I know where I stand in relation to the herd and I know that my place I have a place in that place is not threatened. It's not presently threatened. And so that's, that's an important part of this. I wonder if you could also speak a little bit before we kind of shift back to the human herd, uh, about how leadership functions in the horse herd. Because I think there's some profound lessons that we can learn there.
Ali Schultz:	12:03	Yeah. So horses need each other to survive. In other words, a horse flying solo is not a safe horse. There's safety in numbers really when it comes to the herd and when you have a whole bunch of horses together with four really hard hooves that could knock out any, any woof or whatever that was, that was running up on them, it feels a little bit better than being a solo horse out in the middle of nowhere where you don't really know where you are.
Ali Schultz:	12:40	There's a lot root level survival stuff that really gets triggered when horses are alone. And so, when you look at the herd structure it's more of a lateral system than an overt hierarchy. Contrary to the more popular motif that the herd is led by a stallion with a harem of mares, um, uh, the hurt is often led by a mare or a group of mares.
Ali Schultz:	13:16	Um, that's not always the case. It always depends, of course on population, numbers, demographics, all that jazz. But, um, what's interesting to note is that come spring time, the stallions are fairly important and um, but the mares also carry a lot of weight, um, within just maintaining the ground and really the leadership within a herd. Um, each horse in the herd knows their place.
Ali Schultz:	13:47	They are with each other almost like a chess board. Um, they know how to relate to each other. They read communication signals obviously, and they kind of know their own role. They know where they stand in relation to, um, the rest of, of their compadres and the leader interestingly is the one who moves the least and they don't have to really because they carry the most weight.
Ali Schultz:	14:20	A leader will often, um, they will just by their stance and their presence, they could just be looking at another horse that's

approaching them. And that horse that's approaching them might understand that the look that they're getting basically says that's close enough. I don't need to any closer.

Ali Schultz:	14:52	The essence there is like the leader has a lot of potency. It's not a loud, flamboyant, um, uh, charismatic, large, heavily choreographed song and dance routine just to get t's just a simple nod or a simple request.

Andy Crissinger:	16:01	Yeah. Key thing that I hear you saying in, in the horse, in the horse herd, the leader is leading really from a place of inner groundedness as opposed to a place of outer, uh, sort of show or flamboyance. And that seems really important and also has some implications on the human herd. But then another thing I've heard you say quite a bit that I find so fascinating is that, the leaders of the herd are often the ones who care the most and are most concerned with the wellbeing and safety of the herd, which also seems like a pretty profound, uh, point, uh, that can be applied to human leadership.

Ali Schultz:	16:45	It's one of the most fascinating aspects I think.The best leaders definitely make sure that all members of the herd are cared for and I think importantly, um, the best leaders, um, let the rest of the herd know that the leader has their back. And so in that way, everyone else can feel safe. They can be like, "Oh, okay, I belong here. Um, I know I'm, I'm okay to belong here. There's someone else looking out for me."

Andy Crissinger:	17:34	Yeah.

Ali Schultz:	17:35	Um, horses often lead from behind. And so, um, they're not out front, always paving the way. He or she has everyone, you know, in his view.

Andy Crissinger:	17:56	Mm-hmm (affirmative). So, it's amazing the way that horses can, can give us this, um, really profound picture of what it means to be in relationship with a herd, a group. Um, and to know that our, our place is secure there. Um, they help us understand kind of the, the, the importance of, um, psychological safety. But let's bring it back to the human realm now for a bit. And let's talk about, particularly for leaders, the kinds of folks that we're working with as clients.

Andy Crissinger:	18:37	How can they, how can they operate with a bit more skill, a bit more, um, deafness and insight in creating the conditions that will allow for psychological safety to be present in teams so that those teams can be performing better and more effectively. And maybe before we go there, we could just talk for a minute

about some of the common struggles that we see in the leaders that we work with.

Ali Schultz:	19:04	One of the things that I see is the shift in a lot of leaders in their growth. Especially leaders who have, you know, been founders and have been with the organization obviously from the inception, right? They've been, they've been doing everything they've been living and breathing this idea for um, you know, three, five, 10 years. And the companies grown into a successful entity and they still find it hard to not feel like they know what needs to be done and um, they, they know where to go and offer directives and throw out all the answers to their people and let the people then do the things.
Ali Schultz:	20:02	It's really hard for them to shift their stance from forward doing, doing, doing to a more open, present, very grounded, insecure kind of place in their leadership where they can, um, where they, they're holding the company in a much wider way.
Ali Schultz:	20:44	What more wider than kind of the narrow focus of offering directives and answers and they're inviting input, um, questions, good questions where he's concerns, et cetera from um, their teammates.
Andy Crissinger:	23:48	So I really love what you just shared there. And I think there, there are a couple things, um, that we could draw out and highlight as best practices for leaders.
Andy Crissinger:	24:51	So, one of the things has to do with the sense that I think many, many leaders carry around with them that good leadership means certainty. Good leadership means having the answers. Good leadership means,offering directives to our team and telling them, constantly telling them what to do and where to go. And um, and there, there's certainly time for that kind of behavior, but one of the most important things a leader can be doing to create psychological safety in the group is actually to model a kind of vulnerability and a kind of humility that actually from time to time says, I don't know.
Andy Crissinger:	25:34	I actually don't know the right way to go here. And then follows that up with open questions that draws out wisdom from other places in the group. If the leader is constantly leading with certainty and with directives, it's actually saying it's not safe to not know. It's only safe to know the right answers. And so, what you end up getting would you, what you end up getting the kind of behavior that emerges from the group is, um, a lack of curiosity, a lack of admitting when we don't know something, a lack of questions.

Andy Crissinger:	26:12	And so what that means often is, um, really good ideas, get siloed and bottled up, problems get covered up and papered over and don't rise to the surface. Because what we're not modeling is that it's safe to not know all the answers. And so, that, the way that the, say the, the leader of the horse is holding the group in a different way. It's not out in front leading in a flamboyant way saying, "Here I am follow me."
Andy Crissinger:	26:43	But it's actually allowing the herd to have, to find its place to move and have boundaries and have contributions. That's an incredibly important skill that we see many of our leaders are struggling with. Particularly those, like you said, who have been early founders and are having to navigate that shift to, "Oh, it's not just me anymore driving this thing. It's a team, and we need contributions from everyone."
Ali Schultz:	27:15	Yeah. I think too some of our clients that have come from a corporate background, and they haven't felt a sense of psychological safety, much at all in their work experience. They really don't know what's possible or how to create something different. And there are, um, there are some really important things I think that really help establish a sense of psychological safety within organizations and even within one's leadership, right?
Ali Schultz:	27:59	Because how do you become the leader that is trustworthy? How do you become the leader where everybody knows that you have their back?
Andy Crissinger:	28:09	Yeah.
Ali Schultz:	28:09	Um, they're not, they're not sitting in their chair worried about getting laid off or like they know where they stand. They're getting ample feedback. Um, they, they know how they belong. They feel like they contribute and they feel like they matter. Um, there's so much really that, that's at play in what it takes really to really establish psychological safety.
Ali Schultz:	28:42	The largeness of that task, so to speak is, is how are each one of the tender nervous systems in this environment feeling, and what do they need to feel? I'm almost there deep creature level, animal neurology that they're safe and that they belong. And as humans, our nervous systems are primed just as much. Um, as you know, any other prey animal to feel, um, like our survival in a way is threatened when we don't feel safe or we don't feel like we belong.

Ali Schultz:	29:36	It's almost like you can feel this trembling in your core if you're awake enough to feel it. I think as we can cloak so much of our deep, our deep body wisdom in, um, you know, we can override it with our mental capacity, which we pride so much, but um, you know, when we really start listening, there's an important pulse to pay attention to.
Andy Crissinger:	29:59	Yeah. I think you're absolutely right. And I think some, some leaders might hear that and think it might be overwhelmed. Like, how in the world could I possibly, um, stay in tune with all of the nervous systems of all of the people? And, and that's really not, not, not quite what we're saying. There are some, there's some ways you can do this though, that, um, uh, that can create the conditions for, for more psychological safety.
Andy Crissinger:	30:23	And it doesn't have to be, um, incredibly overwhelming. O-one of the things is the recognize that, um, there needs to be, um, the framing of a container that helps people know where are we going and what's our future together. So, that's why it's important for you as a leader to be communicating this is the why, for our organization, and this is what our priorities are now. And this is where we're going in three months, in six months, and hey, this is the uncertainty that we're facing right now, but here is our best, um, our best plan for the moment.
Andy Crissinger:	31:06	Continually reiterating that, not sort of assuming that, "Well, I talked about that two months ago, so I don't need to talk about it again." No, people need to know where are we going together. And so that's incredibly important. That's part of your role as a leader. And it's okay to say, "I'm actually not sure where we're going in the next six months." That is better than not saying anything at all.
Andy Crissinger:	31:31	And that's certainly better than feigning certainty when you don't have it. So, all of that just lets people know, it sort of lets the herd know, "Oh, okay, here's where I am in relationship to the rest of the herd. Okay, I know where I am." As soon as uncertainty creeps in, as soon as, um, then we're left to our own sort of, uh, our amygdala is constantly scanning the horizon for potential threats and we'll see threats, uh, whether they're there or not.
Andy Crissinger:	32:02	So, so that's part of it. And then, um, you alluded to this I think earlier, Ali, but there are some in the moment behaviors that leaders can take in, in one-on-ones, in meetings. Uh, and, and one of the things that we alluded to earlier was to ask questions to actually lean into what we would, you know, phrase we

would borrow from Ed Schein, humble inquiry, asking questions. It does a couple of things.

Andy Crissinger:	32:30	One, it models for the rest of the team. Those with less positional authority that it's safe to not know. That it's safe to not have all the answers all the time. And it also, is inviting contributions from those who have less positional authority than you. It's actually helping them to see where they can contribute. And I think you had a great story that you were sharing with me earlier about a client, um, who is struggling with this particular behavior in meetings. I wonder if you might talk a little bit about that.
Ali Schultz:	33:56	I have a client, I actually have a few clients that, that struggle with this and in a way, because they'll be, um, in one-on-ones or other meetings where, um, there will be large questions looming in for the team. Um, and they'll see so clearly the answer or they'll see so clearly what needs to be done and they'll have the answer, um, so quick and at the ready and asking questions about it or, or, or pausing long enough to let other people contribute, um, or talk or offer ideas or offer another perspective is actually a really challenging shift. I feel for them because I have felt that myself, um, in numerous, numerous moments and I know what's at risk, um, when, when there's not space for, um, a conversation really.
Andy Crissinger:	35:15	Yeah. I mean what's at risk that I can see there is, um, the best ideas rising to the surface and the team. Um, what's at risk is potentially problem areas not being explored. Um, what's at risk is a learned behavior that we can't make decisions without the leaders, um, input all the time or the leader telling us what the right thing is to do. Um, there's all kinds of learned, learned dependency behaviors that can come in there as well.
Andy Crissinger:	35:54	And then we will often see leaders who are on the one hand frustrated that the team can't seem to do anything without their input, but then they're not seeing all the ways that they are reinforcing or, um, actually contributing to that scenario to, you know, to that, to that set of conditions. Maybe one of the thing we could talk about here that's really important for psychological safety and I love the way we talked about Amy Edmondson and her work.
Andy Crissinger:	36:24	I love how she talks about this. It's, it's really developing a more nuanced and clearly communicated, understood, shared understanding for failure. How do we think about failure? Now, there's a lot of talk about failure in the startup world as a good thing, right? So, fail fast. It's kind of one of those mantras that

gets batted around, but I think we need a more nuanced view of failure.

Andy Crissinger:	36:50	So, on the one hand, um, failure that results from, um, inattention or lack of, lack of attention to detail or not adhering to an agreed upon set of standards. Like that's the kind of failure that needs feedback and needs perhaps even performance improvement plans. But what Edmondson talks about is, it's the kind of failure that comes from risk taking and that results in learning so that we can calibrate and get better as a team.
Andy Crissinger:	37:25	That kind of failure has to be safe and de-stigmatized. And if it's not, our teams won't be performing and we're actually set up not to learn as a team if that kind of failure is stigmatized.
Andy Crissinger:	38:05	And these are the guardrails and this is how we talk about it, and this is how we make it safe in our after action reviews in our postmortems, in our retrospectives to look at something that didn't go well and actually say, "Oh, okay, here's what we've learned from this and here's how we're gonna do it differently going forward. And if that's not present in your culture as a team, chances are you're, you're also going to be struggling with psychological safety.
Ali Schultz:	38:38	You said it really crisply earlier, Andy, you said the failure that results from taking a risk within agreed upon boundaries, um, that's the kind of failure that, that is to be celebrated, and as long as that is, as long as the group knows that, that's not going to be punished, right, then we can foster the learning and the risk, the right risk taking. Um, that is all in line with performance and growth of that only the company but the individuals within it.
Andy Crissinger:	39:16	Yeah. You know, as you were talking, I was just thinking about, um, uh, parenting and I'm a dad. I have three, three kids and as they've grown, one of the struggles that, that I've had is, um, letting them take risks, particularly physical risks. And, um, as a parent I can feel sometimes like my job is to keep them safe all the time, you know, keep them from skinning up their knees or keep them from falling off of a play set or something like that.
Andy Crissinger:	39:49	But by, by, by doing that inadvertently, I can actually be hindering their growth because they're, they're not learning how to take risks. They're not learning. You learn from taking risks. You learn from, you know, trying to get across those monkey bars and that, that actually strengthens their bodies to be able to do those sorts of things. And so, there's a corollary

here in leadership as well, is if we're, if we're constantly playing the game to not make any mistakes, we will necessarily be impeding learning and therefore impeding growth.

Andy Crissinger:	40:29	So just, just to recap, uh, as we, as we finish up here, um, psychological safety is incredibly important for the success of our teams. We are similar to horses. We are biological beings. We are walking bundles of mirror neurons. We are wired to be scanning our environment for threats and to be constantly, subconsciously and consciously asking this question, where am I? Where do I fit in the group? Am I safe? Is it safe? And so, for leaders, it's incredibly important to, uh, at times slow down and recognize that we're not working with machines, we're working with biological beings.

Andy Crissinger:	41:13	And so, we need to be, um, conscious of what it takes to create psychological safety. So, so that those living beings can be, can come together and do successful work. And so that means things like consistently communicating, where are we going together? What's our future together? What is certain, what's uncertain? And in light of uncertainty, what are we going to be doing? Also, making it safe to take risks and fail so that we can learn.

Andy Crissinger:	41:45	And then finally, um, modeling a kind of behavior that says, "Hey, it's okay to ask for help. It's okay to not know." And you do that by asking as many questions as, um, you are giving directives and being certain. And so these are just a few ways that you can think about the cultivation of psychological safety on your teams. And there's, there's obviously much more learning that could be done here.

Andy Crissinger:	42:14	This is the kind of work that we're doing on a daily basis with our clients. But hopefully this says, um, at least sparked some curiosity among some of our listeners out there. Ali, thanks for thanks for being here. It was great having this conversation together.

Ali Schultz:	42:29	Yeah, thank you, Andy.