

Andy Crissinger: Welcome, everybody, to the Reboot Podcast. My name's Andy Crissinger. I'm the director of coaching here at Reboot. And today I'm here with my colleague and friend, Chris VandenBrink. Chris, Great to be with you.

Chris VandenBri...: Hey, Andy.

Andy Crissinger: We're here today with another, uh, practical podcast extra, as these have, uh, come to be known. And today, our topic is the leader as coach. Um, as a coaching company, you can imagine this is a, a topic that is near dear to our hearts and one that comes up, uh, quite frequently in the work that we do with our clients. Um, so maybe we can start, Chris, by talking about, uh, who is this podcast for? Who are we, and who are we speaking to today?

Chris VandenBri...: Yeah, that's a great question. Um, you know, I imagine that people will have an expectation of who this is for as the space that we, we sit at Reboot, so to speak, is for leaders of companies and organizations, right? Who are, uh, leading a team, creating something, uh, that has not existed in the world before.

Chris VandenBri...: But we also might, uh, expand the definition of, of who this is for to not only leaders and organizations, but people who could use the coaching skillset and modality in their own lives, right? People who are leading as husbands, leading as parents, leading his wives, leading in anything, any situation, any capacity where, uh, the skills of being a coach could be helpful. So we don't wanna just constrain it to leaders or organizations, though that is probably where we'll spend a bit more time today.

Andy Crissinger: Right. Great points. So while this may be grounded in examples that come from organizational life or even the kinds of organizations that we work with, startups, um, things of that nature, uh, really, what we're saying here is that coaching is a way of being in the world that's applicable to, to anyone, no matter what your role, or job, or the kind of organization that you work with. Um, so we hope that anybody who listens to this can get some value out of our conversation today.

Chris VandenBri...: Absolutely. And, and maybe that's a good segue into, what it means to be a coach as a leader. Like what are the, what are the skills or the foundations of being a coach that we're talking about?

Andy Crissinger: Yeah. I, so I would say if, if we wanna break down coaching into its kind of fundamental components, one way of looking at that, there's a lot of different ways of breaking it down, but one way of looking at it that we've sort of settled on and that we often talk about in our training is three basic moves that the coach makes.

Andy Crissinger: The first is listening. It's an aspect of presence. It, we show up as listeners, as present listeners. The second is inquiry. We ask questions. That's our kind of m-mode of, uh... Our modus operandi is questions as opposed to telling or fixing or advice-giving. And then the third would be mirroring, reflecting back to the person we're speaking with that, you know, we, we might say traditionally, the client, the person in the client seat, um, what we hear them saying.

Andy Crissinger: And so we've done, just incidentally, uh, we've done some podcast extras, specifically on inquiry and listening from the leadership seat. So you might go check those out. We'll have those links in the show notes. But we haven't really we talked so much in, in the podcast about mirroring. So Chris, if you were to just do a really quick overview of what do we mean when we say mirroring in the context of coaching?

Chris VandenBri...: Yeah. And you, you spoke at a very high level. You said, you know, mirroring is reflecting back to someone else. And if you think about a mirror, if you hold up a mirror, you get, uh, yourself reflected back to you. Right? And in the coaching context, um, we can look at it from the visual, but we often enter into mirroring from the auditory.

Chris VandenBri...: And when we're talking about is when, uh, a direct report, someone who is coming to you for support is going through, uh, explains what's going on. You start by mirroring back what you heard. Sometimes verbatim, right? Word for word.

Andy Crissinger: Right.

Chris VandenBri...: Here's what I heard you say. And so you're repeating back to them what they said to you. And this does a few things. Number one, it just clarifies that you heard what they said, right? So you confirm that the, the data that was transmitted was the data that was received. And this also can have the effect of helping the person feel really heard. Right? And I'll say heard, but, uh, in the mirroring analogy, it can also help them feel seen. This person heard what I say, they understand what I'm going through, right?

Chris VandenBri...: There's another, maybe even, uh, more detailed thing that is happening when we mirror somebody, which is our mirror neurons in our brain get activated. Right? Which helps us feel a bit more, um, in control, maybe keeps us from going into fight or flight and helps us, uh, see more of what's possible and be in a more calm state than perhaps otherwise.

Andy Crissinger: Hmm. Mm-hmm (affirmative). Now I was just thinking about the concept that's popular among developers, uh, of rubber ducking, you know, this practice. And it, it's sort of like you, you get stuck on a problem in the code. And so you, you explain what's going on to this inanimate object, the rubber duck in front of you. And then the act of explaining, you're, you're hearing yourself explain and

articulate the problem and often breakthroughs come there. Mirroring is, is like that, but in the presence of, uh, not an inanimate object, but a, a human being who is an observer, and then reflecting back what they're hearing.

Andy Crissinger: And so not, not only is it great for the relationship and the connection and rapport like you were talking about, but it also is incredibly, um, uh, efficacious to, uh, breakthroughs. It can help with breakthroughs. So, uh, maybe we'll do in the future a deep dive on just mirroring. That would be a good, uh, podcast extra for the future. But I think...

Andy Crissinger: So for now, uh, who's this for? Leaders, um, but also kind of everybody. And what do we mean when we talk about coaching while we're talking about bringing to bear these three basic skills of listening, inquiry, and mirroring? Um, maybe let's talk about, uh, real briefly, what's different about being a coach from the leader's seat versus being a coach as a coach, like what you and I do as our primary vocation in the world.

Chris VandenBri...: Yeah. And it's, it's a really important difference to name. Uh, and partly ties back to who this is for. Because I imagine there will be some coaches who are listening to this, and there will also be some leaders of organizations and teams that are listening to this. And it's important, uh, how you think about, um, this difference between being a coach as a coach and being a coach as a leader.

Chris VandenBri...: So I'll start with what it means to do what we do and the stance that we hold with our clients, which is our primary objective is to hold that human being in a space where they can discover who they want to be, what's important to them, what is going to be most in service to their wellbeing as a human being first. Right?

Chris VandenBri...: And, uh, there's a wonderful, um, consequence of this, which is, as people become more of who they are, oftentimes they show up better in their place of work, right? They show up more engaged, more inspired, more motivated, but there is still, at the heart of it, a constraint for us, which is the goal of the individual, right? The individual's "why."

Chris VandenBri...: When you're a leader in an organization, the constraints and the goals change a little bit, right.? There is a goal or a "why" of an organization that is, uh, perhaps different than the, the amalgamated wise of the individuals in it.

Andy Crissinger: Yep.

Chris VandenBri...: However, for the overlap between those two, there can be magic, right?

Andy Crissinger: Right.

Chris VandenBri...: And synergy.

Andy Crissinger: I was just thinking how sometimes we, we'll make, uh, deliberately provocative statements in the early, early state ages of working with an individual client. And it's, it, it, it's true, but it's also what, like we're coming from a particular perspective. We might say something like, you know, we don't care, I don't care as a coach, I'm speaking to a client, uh, about the success of your organization. I care about you.

Chris VandenBri...: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Andy Crissinger: And what we mean by that is we are radically showing up, uh, on behalf of that individual client that's sitting before us. And we believe that if we're doing our job well, that over an arc of time, that is actually gonna benefit their organization. But we're not, um, we're not optimizing for that in the short-term. Uh, and, but it's different.

Andy Crissinger: When we're leading an organization we're trying to coach from that seat, we actually are, um... That's maybe flipped a little bit. We, we're op- we are optimizing for the success of the organization, but we are also recognizing that, um, the organization will be successful if the individuals are self-actualizing and growing and learning and bringing their creativity and ingenuity to bear. Um, and so, yeah, just a little bit of a, of a, of a different perspective.

Chris VandenBri...: Yeah. And just one quick build is, you know, in the coach's coach hat, I think we're, we're attempting to align the individual with the version of themselves they want to be most in the world.

Andy Crissinger: Yep.

Chris VandenBri...: And in the leader as coach scenario, you, we can still use the coaching, uh, toolkit, right? In order to align the individuals and the, uh, the actions they are taking with, um, the aspirations of the organization.

Andy Crissinger: Maybe one last thing, preliminarily, before we get into kind of the, um, the heart of this. Um, why is this important? What's, what's our thesis here about why leaders ought to, um, consider coaching as a hat that they wear, you know, a, a modality that they, that they assume, you know, as they go about their, their jobs? Um, why does it matter? What are the benefits?

Chris VandenBri...: Wow. I'm having a pause there because my brain just exploded when you asked that question. (laughs) There are too many, there are too many to name. So in the context of work, in the context of organizations that are building something new in the world, there are a lot of unanswered questions that need to be navigated in order to build the company, grow the people, um, gain traction, uh, increase the bottom line, however you wanna spin it. In order to grow an organization, you have to, have to move through uncertainty. And when there's

uncertainty in a situation, there are many different skills you can bring to bear. And one of the best I have found is coaching.

Andy Crissinger: Hmm.

Chris VandenBri...: And the reason for that is the coaching toolkit helps people to clarify and the aim what is known and what is unknown and figure out different pathways to navigate the unknown.

Andy Crissinger: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Chris VandenBri...: So at a high level, that's what occurs to me. I'm curious what comes up for you in that question?

Andy Crissinger: No, I think, I think that's really well said. I mean I think there's been, there's been a lot written over the last, probably couple of decades about, um, increasing complexity, uh, in, um, the world of work, in organizations, in economies. And I think coaching is a set of skills that helps us navigate complexity really well, um, because it's not a certainty system, it's, uh, but it's designed to increase rapid learning and build resilience.

Andy Crissinger: That's maybe for me, the best case to be made for why leaders ought to adopt these skills and, and, you know, uh, I, I, implement them as part of their, their toolkit as leaders.

Chris VandenBri...: Yeah. And one other, um, thing that occurs to me is that it's a skill set that easily translates to both our ex- the external kind of o- objects-based reality that we operate in as, as leaders in companies and also the internal, not always rational, not always, uh, conscious, um, places that we, um, we inhabit as well. And you can just as easily ask an open and honest question about, uh, P&L as you can about someone's experience around working at a certain organization.

Andy Crissinger: Mm. Yeah. That's a really great point.

Chris VandenBri...: Andy, you know, that brings up for me a question about, um, we, we've talked a little about who this is for, what does it mean and why we might bring this skillset to bear? And the question that now occurs to me is when, when might we start using these coaching modalities and skills. And I'm, I'm curious what comes up for you around that?

Andy Crissinger: Yeah. So the way that we are wanting to approach this question of when is it appropriate to put on your coach hat is to maybe bucket this into three categories; uh, always, sometimes, and never.

Chris VandenBri...: (laughs)

Andy Crissinger: So when is it always great to put on your coaching hat? When is it sometimes helpful to do so? And then when should you not do it? When should you actually apply a different lens or, or set of, um, set of skills?

Andy Crissinger: So let's start with always, when is it always okay, advisable to, uh, to lead with coaching? And, uh, so we would say it, it always pays to start with coaching skills when we are encountering someone else who's stuck in some way.

Chris VandenBri...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Andy Crissinger: And it doesn't mean you have to stay there for the entire interaction, but one of the most powerful questions that I've ever encountered in this work is asking someone what would be most helpful here.

Andy Crissinger: So here's an example, kind of like a pretty common example that leaders will experience. You are in a one-on-one with a direct report or a team member. And that person, in the course of normal conversation, as we do when we have one-on-ones, begins to articulate a challenge that they're experiencing. It could be anything. It could be, it could be very, very small, minimal. It could be a challenge they're having with another team member. It could be confusion about a project. It could be frustration with a policy. Um, it could be anything.

Andy Crissinger: It's tempting to go right into advice, uh, problem-solving, um, sharing from experience, any number of those things. But this really powerful question is asking what would be most helpful here? How can I be most helpful to you right now? And that can then direct any, how that person responds then directs your next move, which might be more coaching, or it might be sharing from experience, or something else. But that is an incredibly powerful question that, as you were saying earlier, applies, not just to leadership, but any kind of human relationship that we're in, where we might find ourselves in that helping dynamic.

Chris VandenBri...: Yeah. Thank you for that. That's, I think, very, very insightful. And it makes me think about, um, kind of the stance that we hold as coaches, which I'm sure, maybe not everybody, but a lot of people have heard this, this phrase before, which is part of coaching is believing that everyone has all of the resources they need to solve their own problems and challenges.

Andy Crissinger: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Chris VandenBri...: And it's subtle, but when you start with a question in contrast to a solution or a directive or an answer, you, you send a subtle message that, uh, you believe that this person can get to the answer on their own.

Chris VandenBri...: So it's subtle but powerful.

Andy Crissinger: Yep. Well, well that brings up a, a maybe, perhaps an even deeper opportunity for self-reflection on the part of the leader, or whoever's trying to, um, implement this approach, is, do you actually believe that? (laughs)

Chris VandenBri...: Yeah. Yeah.

Andy Crissinger: And not to bring in sort of judgment or shame or anything like that, but if you don't, I think that's worth taking a step back and reflecting on a bit. (laughs)

Chris VandenBri...: Yeah.

Andy Crissinger: You know, what, what could be limiting about that way of moving through the world. But then, and, or also with some self-compassion. Hmm. I wonder why has it been important to me in my life to believe that people are not capable? And so we could, (laughs) we could probably do another separate podcast episode on this set of questions here, (laughs) but I think it's important to, to at least name, um, are we moving through our lives as if other people are incapable of solving their own problems?

Chris VandenBri...: Well, I think you... I'm so glad that you said that 'cause it, it speaks directly to the ease with which you can go and use this toolkit either on an outward-facing situation like a direct report coming to you with a challenge back to your, your own internal patterns of behavior. And, uh, you know, maybe the st- the getting stuck is, we imagine happening outside of ourselves like this, this person who can't figure out the solution, but it may be our behavior, our actions are inability to ask open questions and create some space for someone else to find their own answer is in fact where we're getting stuck.

Andy Crissinger: That's a great point. And, and I see this dynamic show up again and again as leaders are sort of moving through a growth trajectory that requires them to, I don't know, very practically speaking say delegate more you know, when the organization gets to a point where, um, the founder can't be the sole problem-solver anymore. I mean, these are not simply practical, behavioral, uh, questions. They are ide- they, they can be identity questions that people have to reckon with in order to even adopt a new set of behaviors. So... I mean, if you've been around Reboot awhile and you've listened to our podcast, you know that this is, you know, this is an area where, it's reign where we often find ourselves and can not find ourselves because this is about growing as a, growing up as a human, as much as it is, you know, adopting new sets of practices, uh, as a leader, uh, these things are intertwined.

Andy Crissinger: So, okay. So it's always a good idea to ask what would be most helpful before we just assume we know and dive in. What are, what are some examples of the, the sometimes bucket when it's sometimes appropriate to adopt a coaching stance from the leader's chair?

Chris VandenBri...: Yes. You just alluded to this about this, these, um, kind of moments that we have difficulty as leaders delegating and letting go, perhaps, of the control of having the answer all the time. And the reason that we say this is sometimes is because, um, it's really important to pay attention to the context and the conditions that we're operating in to understand what the best hat to wear is, so to speak.

Chris VandenBri...: And if I can paint a picture of a typical journey that a founder might go on, right? One that is the company is growing and, um, the, the team is bringing on more people and more problem solvers, there can be a point where, before which, the leaders that are in the organization have needed to be for the health of the organization, the main problem solvers, right? They've needed to have all the answers or at least go find the answers.

Andy Crissinger: We might see this particularly show up, say in, in a, a co-founding team. So say there are two co-founders. In the early days, those two co-founders are the defacto executive team and are functioning in this way.

Chris VandenBri...: Yeah. And that's great... Yeah, there might just be two or three people.

Andy Crissinger: Yep.

Chris VandenBri...: And they are literally answering all of the questions and doing all of the work. Right? And these behaviors help them be successful. Right? They, uh, they start to get some revenue and they maybe raise, uh, a seed series or a series A. and all of a sudden the, there's a switch. There's a switch in the number of people that are around to solve problems. And also there's a switch in the techniques and tactics that are going to be useful to continue the growth of the organization. Right?

Andy Crissinger: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Chris VandenBri...: And this is the switch or the point or the, I kind of think of it as an inflection point where before coaching wasn't the most helpful modality and now it is. So sometimes you hit this inflection point where it's time to start actually crowdsourcing the solutions from people that are not you anymore.

Chris VandenBri...: There's a story that comes to mind of a client of mine who, uh, was going through this process. And the way that the strategy that he brought to bear in trying to move that transition was to continue doing what he had done before but at a higher level. And so what I mean by that is he thought the best way to move through this inflection point was to figure out how he would solve it. And then to make it abundantly clear not only how he would solve it with his direct reports, but what they should do and when they should do it. So from his perspective, he was making this incredibly well-defined path for them to just walk down.

Andy Crissinger: Yeah.

Chris Vandenberg...: And was getting frustrated when the outcomes weren't the same as the outcomes he would get from walking down that path. The outputs changed from the inputs. The inputs that he used to get certain outputs, uh, from were now no longer correlated. And I asked him, well, I many questions do you ask? He said: I don't ask questions. You don't need to ask questions. I'm paraphrasing here, but, you know, uh, I need to make this as clear for them as possible.

Chris Vandenberg...: And so we started working on just starting to insert some questions into the conversation, right? What have you tried perhaps? Uh, what have you learned? What are all the different approaches you might take to this, this task, to this, this challenge? And so you can start to see that with the beginning of, uh, the coaching men- mentality or coaching mindset, you start to shift that responsibility or shift that accountability to the person who's actually now responsible for the task.

Andy Crissinger: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chris Vandenberg...: And by responsibility, I mean, the responsibility of the thought process of actually going through, um, uh, going through the process to come to an answer, to get to an answer.

Andy Crissinger: Yeah. So, so this client, if I'm hearing you correctly, was kind of over-functioning by continuing to live as if it was his responsibility to not only define the "why" sufficiently but also the "how" for folks, um, even though those people presumably had been hired because of their expertise, because of their capability, because of their even past experience solving these kinds of problems. And so, um, they're not able to, to function effectively. They're, they're given no room to, (laughs) to bring those skills to bear.

Chris Vandenberg...: Yep.

Andy Crissinger: So a couple of things here. When the "why" is sufficiently defined, but the "how" and the, "what" aren't, which is often the case when we are leading, um, a, a, a growing scaling organization that's still finding its way. We know why we exist, we know kind of the problem we're trying to solve in the world, but we're still discovering how we're gonna get there and what we're gonna focus on.

Andy Crissinger: Those are great opportunities to coach the key people around us that we're bringing in, that we want to, we, we want them to bring their creativity, their ingenuity to bear on these questions. And so when we believe they have enough expertise and capability to get the answer, this is where listening, questions, mirroring can be really powerful from the leader seat.

Chris VandenBri...: Absolutely. And it makes me wonder, Andy, if there's, uh, a time where we should not put on the coach hat. When should we avoid being a coach as a leader?

Andy Crissinger: Yeah. There are a couple of things that occur to me. One is just very simple when what we really need to do is give someone feedback. (laughs)

Chris VandenBri...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Andy Crissinger: I see a lot of times, uh, questions being used as sort of a, a, almost as a, a, a form of conflict aversion. So I'm going, I'm gonna coaching 'cause that's the good leadership practice, but it really, it can be, uh, sort of a form of passive aggression. We're asking someone questions, trying to get them to a destination, um, that we want, you know, somewhere we want them to be, as opposed to just saying, you know, I need to give you some feedback. Like, what you did impacted me or the team negatively.

Andy Crissinger: And so, you know, uh, because we're in relationship together and because this is what we do when we're in a healthy relationship, we give each other feedback, uh, we might use co-coaching as a form of passive aggression. Don't do that. That's really, really damaging. And can all make people begin to distrust anytime you start asking questions, cause like, there's an angle here. Where are you headed with this? It can induce some resentment if you behave that way. Um, often when there's an emergency and there's just is not time or the stakes are incredibly high, those are moments where, um, you know, metaphorically speaking, if there's, uh, if we're in a crowded room and there is a fire, that's not a time to ask an open, honest question. Uh, that's a time to actually direct.

Andy Crissinger: And then the last one is I think, I, I've seen this play out. I was thinking of a specific example with a client organization that I worked with, uh, a while ago, uh, where a colleague of mine and I were co-facilitating a strategic leadership, uh, team meeting, uh, strategic planning session. And it became clear that the team around this central leader really were craving and longing for some constraints and boundaries around, uh, the strategic direction.

Andy Crissinger: And I think this leader, from a really good-hearted place, was wanting to encourage consensus and wanting people to feel really good about the strategic approach. And so was often sort of down, downplaying their, their view on things, but was creating this vacuum, in the room where no one quite knew where this leader stood on some pretty core-directional questions. And so I think that might have been an example of where this person want, this leader was leading with, of sort of an open inquiry-based listening centric approach, but it was actually undermining the team. Because what the team wanted to know is where do you stand on a couple of these really key trade-offs. And they weren't getting that. And so there was this sort of, uh, thrash that was happening in the conversation.

Chris VandenBri...: Yeah. What I hear there is, you know, coaching is such a great modality for expanding what's possible. And when in an organization, especially their trade-offs and what's called for is more of a, um, a constraint or a decision being made.

Andy Crissinger: Yeah.

Chris VandenBri...: Perhaps having all possibilities available is not that helpful.

Andy Crissinger: Right, and I think trade-offs is a great way to think about this. You know, that when, when trade-offs need to be made clear and determined often that's where the leader needs to make a call.

Chris VandenBri...: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Andy Crissinger: And it's not to say that you, you have to make that call without consulting others or, gathering as much wisdom as possible, but the boundaries and the constraints need to be made clear because then the team has space within which they can operate. You know, the container becomes clear when there's... You know, we often talk about containers hold energy and possibility. And in the absence of a container, you know, we're just, we're in ch- a chaos kind of environment.

Chris VandenBri...: Yeah. I think that's such a great point.

Andy Crissinger: So maybe real quickly, Chris, if we've alluded to some of this, but if we're not wearing the coaching hat, what are some of the other hats that we would be wearing instead?

Chris VandenBri...: Yeah. I think in that last example, the hat to be wearing is the decider, the decider hat. Sometimes we just need to make a decision. Right? In the example of, perhaps an emergency or when swift action is called for, perhaps we need to wear the hat of the director and issue directives. Right? And I think sometimes it's related to that, the example you shared, but, um, especially when we're the founder or CEO of a company, we need to wear the visionary hat.

Andy Crissinger: Yeah.

Chris VandenBri...: And really understand and explain the why. Right? Why are we all organizing around this shared goal? Uh, 'cause this really helps people, um, uh, this really helps people get clear on where they are headed, the direction.

Andy Crissinger: Yeah.

Chris VandenBri...: Perhaps the how, the approach or what needs to happen to get there is not clear, but, um, if, if that is left unanswered or remains muddy, it's going to be hard to use. Um, it's going to be hard to direct action in alignment.

Andy Crissinger: Yeah. I think that's really well said.

Chris VandenBri...: Yeah. And I wonder then, Andy, you know, if we've kind of gone through, you know, who this is for, what it is, when to use it, when not to use, what to do instead. If people are, are interested in learning more about either becoming coaches coach or a coaches leader, where might they look?

Andy Crissinger: Yeah. Well, over the years at Reboot, we've put together a number of resources, many of them free, um, that people can dip into. Uh, I'm thinking of our free courses. Um, I'm thinking of, you know, some of the past podcast episodes that we've referenced. We do a little bit deeper dive into some of these skill sets and share some frameworks.

Andy Crissinger: There are great training programs out there, even if you're not thinking of becoming a professional coach, that can give you opportunities to practice these skills and get feedback in kind of a guided setting. And, and maybe, lastly, even if you don't do those things, just awareness and attention to these three components of coaching; listening, inquiry, mirroring, just making them a life practice not needing to do them professionally or perfectly, but just beginning to bring your attention and awareness to, when am I doing this? When am I not doing it? Giving yourself a ton of grace to not be good at it right away, can be incredibly powerful and useful.

Andy Crissinger: And then you'll know when you start to maybe come up against your limitations and where you're really struggling. Um, that's maybe time to reach out for help get some training, um, start working with someone, um, do a little bit of a deeper dive into the areas where you want to grow. Um, but this is just a great way to move through life. And so making it a personal practice is a really powerful thing. Anything you'd add to that?

Chris VandenBri...: Couldn't have said it better myself.

Andy Crissinger: Well, thanks, Chris, for doing this. This has been a great conversation today. We're gonna put a bunch of these resources in the show notes for folks to take a look at. And we hope to continue this topic. So, we might have some additional kind of forays into this space of the leader as coach in the coming months on the podcast. So keep an eye out for those. And if you have questions, feel free to send those to us. Reach out via email. We'd love to hear from you.