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Hello and welcome to the Reboot podcast, Wisdom for Work series. My name is Andy Chrissinger. I'm the director of coaching here at Reboot and also a Coach and Facilitator myself. And today I wanted to talk a little bit about retrospectives.

I want to briefly address why retrospectives are important, how they can help you and your team and I also want to share a really simple, lean approach to doing retrospectives that you could start implementing immediately without a lot of process heavy lifting.

Okay, let's start by talking about retrospectives. What are they, why are they important? At the most basic level, a retrospective is just a process by which we analyze and codify learnings from some kind of past action. Now, we can do retrospectives at the end of major initiatives, big projects. We can also do them at more shorter intervals, kind of on an ongoing basis. We can do them in real-time, daily, weekly. So essentially, a retrospective is an opportunity for us to pause, zoom up a little bit, reflect on past action, draw out some learnings so that we can carry those learnings forward in future decisions and actions and processes that we take with our teams.

One of the most important aspects, I think, of doing retrospectives well is to engage the entire team, to engage the full set of stakeholders in the conversation. That helps us form more of a systems representation of what's happening, versus maybe skewing the perspective of one person or just a few people. And I think this is often a risk when the leader owns the retrospective process or controls too much of the retrospective. process, we can get all sorts of cognitive biases coming into play. And we're probably not going to see the full picture. So engaging multiple voices is important.

Another important principle is emphasizing the 'what,' as opposed to the 'who.' Perhaps you've heard of the concept of blameless retrospectives, or sometimes they're called blameless postmortems. I don't love that term postmortem, by the way, for retrospectives, because it implies that we only do this kind of learning when something has died or broken or maybe gone badly off the rails. I think these are these kinds of exercises are important to do on a regular basis, regardless of whether an initiative is going well or has been successful, or whether it's gone poorly or gone off the rails.

So again, an emphasis on the 'what,' as opposed to the 'who' back to that earlier point. Sometimes the 'who' is important. And it's not that we want to avoid giving direct feedback or if someone has made a big mistake, we don't wanna pretend that's not so. But doing a group retrospective process may not be the time and place to address that. That may be better served in a one-on-one and direct conversation.

So when we come together to do this kind of past action, it's not that we're tiptoeing around anything related to 'who did what' or 'who didn't do what.' It's just that's not where the emphasis is. The emphasis is on 'we,' what can we learn together? And it acknowledges that a team is a system of multiple parts. And often, even when there's breakdown, it's rarely attributable to just

one individual. And so there's a lot for us to learn here.

And then just to speak a bit about why retrospectives are important in the first place, of course, they help us codify and carry forward learnings. They help us become, you know, the so-called learning team, a team that is adaptive, that doesn't keep making the same mistakes over and over or fail to innovate. They're also really powerful resilience practices for teams. Often in environments where things are changing very often, you know, in a growth organization, in a startup, in an organization that's existing in, you know, in an environment where the market conditions are shifting a lot, that can feel like whiplash to team members. That way of existing for a while, for some folks, can start to wear on them, and it can feel like nothing's ever stable. Some people thrive in that kind of environment, others really struggle with it.

The retrospective process, having a regular ritual of collective learning that you can come back to, I think helps build a sense of resiliency among the team. It's like, okay, yeah, things may be changing all the time. We may not be able to count on, you know, next month it feeling the same way that it did this month. But we have our process that we walk through. And that process grounds us. It ties us to... you know, kind of something that is predictable. And what's predictable is we pause at defined intervals and we zoom up just a bit and we learn together. So having that process built into your team experience, I think can help a group become more resilient and have more of a sense of stability even in highly dynamic conditions.

So let me share a really simple nimble, easy-to-implement process for doing retrospectives that we love. Um, and it is called **what, so what, now what**, what, so what now what, and it's built around, as you can probably already tell three basic lines of inquiry. And, um, I'm just going to go through them. Let me talk about what each, um, each line of inquiry is meant to uncover.

So the first question is, **What?** in this round of the discussion, and by the way, this can happen relatively informally, it can happen over the course of a weekly team sync, you could set aside more time if you need it, but the what step is just about gathering data. And in that stage, we're trying to hold back the tide of making, drawing conclusions too soon. And we really just want to get all of the information, all of the data, as fair witnesses out into the open in a shared way. This is helping us build a shared sense of truth, so to speak, kind of a shared perspective of what actually is happening or has happened over this period of time of work. So if there's quantitative data, we want to have that visible. If there's qualitative data, you know, how did people feel about this thing that we did, we want to get that out into the open. We're not trying to assess right and wrong, or again, jump too quickly to next steps. It's just what is the data that's gonna help us see the full picture? And this can be done relatively quickly. It can be done with links to posts, or dashboards, or metrics, or again, qualitative input. But we just get it all out there and we spend a little bit of time just sitting with that, making sure we're, we're on the same page.

Then we turn to the second question, which is, **So what?**, and this is the line of inquiry where we do want to draw out insights and learnings. What are we learning from this? What does it mean? And so with the data present, we might ask, okay, what stands out? What's the story

that's forming from this data? What are the lessons that we've learned? What insights do we now have? Are there any principles that we're seeing? Are there new learnings? There's this challenge past conceptions that we've had about reality or about best practices. And so, 'so what' encompasses what patterns and insights are emerging?

The final line of inquiry, the last question is **Now what?** And this is where we move to asking about next steps. In light of all this, in light of the data, in light of the meaning that we're making, what are the next best actions for us to take? This is where you might do something like a start-stop-continue type exercise. But notice how if you jump right to the start-stop-continue or what should we do, you miss the opportunity presented by the first two questions, 'what' and 'so what,' to build a shared picture. So I found that when teams try to get to the, you know, start, stop, continue too soon, they end up talking past each other because they skip that first, those first couple steps of shared meaning-making. So final question, now what? What should we do? What next steps? Who else should know about this? Is there anyone else we need to communicate with? Any other parts of the organization that we should update? and then we move from there.

Again, this is the kind of thing that you could spend a full day on if you're at an offsite, for instance, and debriefing a big initiative or a long project. It's also something that you could do in 30 minutes with a small enough group of people. You can do this really quickly. And the team, if you practice this, the team will get better at it. They'll start to internalize the pattern of inquiry. And it's something that can happen without a lot of you know, heavy lifting, as I said earlier, around process and setting things up.

It can be helpful to remind people at the beginning of, this is the process, this is why we do retrospectives. It's important for us to follow these three steps. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. So some facilitation can be helpful here. So people aren't immediately jumping, say, to recommended next steps before they've done the first two steps. But usually, I find this doesn't require a whole lot of facilitative intervention. And the process is pretty simple and elegant.

Okay, maybe one last thing to address before we close up this topic of retrospectives and the what, so what, now what approach. I really love the work of Amy Edmondson. She wrote a phenomenal book, *The Fearless Organization*. She's published other works. She's done a lot of research around the topics of psychological safety inside of organizations. And one of the things that she talks about in her work that I really appreciate and it applies to this idea of retrospectives is the importance of reframing or destigmatizing failure. So as I mentioned earlier, often the only time we slow down to do retrospectives is when something goes badly wrong, hence the term postmortem. And it is good to slow down and assess what happened when something goes badly wrong. But... But often if that's the only time we're doing this kind of work, we're reinforcing maybe subtly this idea that failure is something to be avoided at all costs. And what I appreciate about Edmondson's work is she encourages us to think with more nuance around failure.

Of course there are failures that come from, you know, inattentiveness. or just an unwillingness to follow a known best practice. Those are not the kinds of failures that we want to celebrate in any way. But there are other kinds of failure. Sometimes failures come from things that are completely outside of our control, things in the environment.

If you're familiar with the concept of a VUCA environment, you might be familiar with that, the idea of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. And often even if we have good process, but we run into a VUCA environment, we may get a bad outcome. Um, that's a really awesome opportunity to learn, to increase our awareness of the system that we're operating in. So a great time to do a retrospective, but it's important to treat that kind of failure differently from say a failure of in adherence to a process or, or like I was talking about earlier.

And then there's another kind of failure, which has to do with taking risks to learn, running experiments, trying things that we've never tried before to get some feedback and then make shifts based on what we're learning there. And that's the kind of failure that we ought to be celebrating. And Edmondson talks a lot about that in her work as well.

So it's important as we think about retrospectives. To also think carefully about our concept of failure, especially if we're in the leader's seat, how we frame failure goes a long way. Are we creating an environment where we're actually making people afraid of failure, like the good kinds of failure? And if so, that's gonna just promote hiding and gaming the system, people won't be taking risks. And so... There's an opportunity again to destigmatize and reframe failure as more of a natural byproduct of what happens when we experiment and innovate.

So again, retrospectives are a very practical way to cultivate a more healthy sense and awareness and treatment of failure in our teams. They can also be really fun if we do them well. And the sense that people get of, oh, we're learning, we're adapting, we're growing, can be quite energizing, I've found. So if you don't have a practice already in your team of some kind of retrospective, some kind of collective learning, consider trying out something as simple as what, so what, now what, and see how it goes.