

56 The 4 killers of curiosity and how to avoid them with Dr ...

Tue, 6/22 11:14AM 35:02

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

curiosity, leader, values, experiences, mistakes, team, organization, exploration, curious, important, stress tolerance, highest potential, people, noticed, knowing, anxiety, experimentation, role, world, anxiety inducing

SPEAKERS

Dr. Alison Horstmeyer, Murielle Machiels



Murielle Machiels 00:00

Hi there, and welcome in this episode of rebel leader with a heart. Today I'm talking with Allison Horstmeyer, about curiosity. Why is it so important in a vuca? world? How can you get it? What are the big curiosity killers, because in the latest interviews I've had, and also conversations I've had with CEOs and other leaders, I noticed that the word curiosity often came up. So if you want to have more curiosity in your life or in your organization, be sure to listen to this very interesting conversation. I'm Murielle, co Mum, an educator, I used to work really hard and sacrificed important things to me until I lost my motivation. Fast forwards fast, many failed attempts and lessons learned. And I found a way to reach great results while working less. Today, I'm obsessed with helping other leaders builds meaningful lives. So each week, I'll be sharing inspiration to change your life and organization. This is rebel leader with a hearts. Welcome, Alison, welcome in the podcasts, it's nice having you here. So maybe before we start into the topic of curiosity, you can talk a little bit about yourself and tell us who you are. Okay, well, thank you so much for having me here. It's



Dr. Alison Horstmeyer 01:30

such a pleasure to be with you. And I love that you're, you know, on the other side of the

pond, so to speak, and that we get to connect in this way. So previously, I was a business development executive at the intersection of tech and media, typically global purview, typically building businesses on the next generation of technology. And as I move through my career, what I found was that, you know, I really loved helping other people be successful, whether it was the international sales team or cross functional team. And I also really observed a certain level of anxiety and stress and complacency around me and also different leadership styles. And I was curious about, you know, what, what was really going on underneath, about that. And so I went back to school, and really dived into the science between the mind and body behavioral science, got certified as a coach in the process certified as a yoga teacher, and really kind of looked at both from a scholar and practitioner standpoint, you know, what influences our behavior. And it was during my mindfulness research, I was, I was looking at anxiety. And I was like, can you be curious and anxious at all at the same time. And that was incredibly naive. But, you know, I thought I had something. And that led me to this really rich, nonlinear journey into the world of curiosity and curiosity, specifically in the workplace, which is kind of more of an emergent field or a strand of the research and probably the last 1015 years. And, and then it came back to anxiety, in a way because anxiety is an indelible part of curiosity, we call it stress tolerance, the stress tolerance dimension. And so that's really kind of where I've been spending my time in terms of more of a humanistic lens of how we activate curiosity for for ourselves, or self awareness, or interpersonal relationships. And certainly, there's research that connects it to creativity and innovation, but I'm kind of more interested in the, and how it makes us so innately human.



Murielle Machiels 03:56

Yeah, nice, really nice. And I also love the mind and body connection. That's also what I try to bring now in organizations if you want to change the culture and your mindset, but maybe you can tell us why has curiosity becomes so important in a vuca world, because when when I talk now to other CEOs in the world, the word curiosity often pops up. So why, why has it become so important?



Dr. Alison Horstmeyer 04:27

Yes. Um, so I think why it's become important is a couple things where we're seeing more more research conducted around it specifically, studies that, you know, Mark has supported for example, since 2016. We see companies like Novartis starting to really integrate this idea of curiosity or learner into their culture, we see Microsoft doing the same thing. And what I what I'm seeing is that there's some understanding that curiosity is a really powerful meta skill. And what I mean by meta skill, a higher order skill that

energizes and empowers other skills, for example, critical thinking, creativity, divergent thinking, empathy, collaboration, trust. And we have we have empirical data that supports that there's a connection between curiosity and these things. We also see in the positive psychology literature, that curiosity is one of the top four character strengths that are connected to psychological well being and life satisfaction. So we know that there's there's something about it, when we can open ourselves up for exploration that actually can empower us and actually increase our resilience. And I think that we're recognizing in the workplace, that there, there's something really powerful about it, but we don't really understand it quite yet. Because we've tend to oversimplified it in terms of the definition, and then it becomes severely underutilized. And then because we have that misunderstanding, we don't really have the right culture to to support



Murielle Machiels 06:28

it, what would be then a good definition of curiosity.



Dr. Alison Horstmeyer 06:33

So my mind's a little bit dense, but it had but it but for a reason, and I'll explain why. So my definition and I've kind of amalgamated other definitions from the literature is the self directed. So it's autonomous you choose when you're curious. So the self directed seeking exploration and immersion into certain situations that will have the highest potential for new experiences, and new information. And those experiences tend to be uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. So pretty much the vuca world, and we need to lean into those kinds of experiences, because as I said, they have the highest potential to give us new inputs, whether that's market data, product data, a new experience. Because personally, if we get new experiences, then we're making new neural connections in our brains. And we know now from neuroscience that we can do that until the day we die, right? We don't have to have the same pathways in our brain, the same rules that that conditioned us to certain behaviors and certain points of views. And curiosity can be the doorway to expanding that horizon for us. And in that vuca world, we need to be we need to be normalizing experimentation. Right? You know, there's, there's informed risk taking and there's intelligent failure, but I think we're still very much holding on to status quo, because we are wired for certainty. And now we need to shift where we're saying, No, let's, let's cat, you know, let's let's maximize our resources for today. But at the same time in parallel, let's be getting ready for the future. And that requires exploration and experimentation, and agile, failure, and those kinds of things. And it's the companies that straddle both of those that will have the highest potential for success in that vuca world.



Murielle Machiels 08:45

Yeah, but what I see because I, how I like to function is, well, I like to learn a lot of new things or to experiment with with things. And sometimes those things have nothing to do with my work or but just curious, like you. And I absorb you know, I love to absorb a lot of new experiences and new information. And I also when I prepare for instance, a keynote or new chorus, or I do that also I try to let my mind wander Yeah. And and then I also love to do something completely different to then see what emerges and often emerges then is very powerful. It says, The problem is that in my audience, most of the people they are working like hell, and they're busy all the time. So there is not much place either for reading their emails for thinking strategically for managing their energy, but then for wondering because you Yeah, maybe you can you can tell us a little bit more about that. How do you get to that curiosity? What? What are the ingredients that you need?



Dr. Alison Horstmeyer 10:09

So there's there's four dimensions to curiosity. One is the not knowing. So when we tend to be so busy and in the weeds, then we're just getting very, we're being a tactician, and we're just continuing to doing what we know. And the issue is what happens when you get thrown a curveball, we call it a violation of expectation, literally, something you expected doesn't happen. And then you have to problem solve. And the idea that, you know, we have to just, we just have to keep solving for for the moment doesn't prepare you for the future kind of really complex problems. And so the, like, the the fundamental thing that needs to happen is you have to be say, Okay, I don't know, I am recognize you don't know. And then what are you going to do with that? Not knowing, because a lot of times I feel we're so conditioned in our workplaces to be the knowers to get it, right. Yeah. And I call that the expert mindset that's proving You're right, your agenda, really informed by cognitive biases and assumptions are really holding on to the status quo, there's like, no room of reflection. So it requires a mindset shift to be okay. Let me be the Explorer, which fundamentally means I'm going to start leaning in to figure out what I don't know. The second part of curiosity is exploration. So it has a very active quality to it, and very active energy. Because you can observe and be interested and do absolutely nothing. Yeah. So the idea is that there there is some actual doing, you can think you're asking is a verb in that way. And it's a process. And in that exploration, the third facet is openness. So is it you know, openness to unfamiliar different ideas? Is it openness to experimenting, trying, you know, trying something out in kind of a pilot scenario? You know, what's the what's the level of openness because it was interesting in my, in my research with my study participants, the more they could let go of their preconceived notions, and biases and assumptions, the more liberated they felt to explore, it's when they were in these very strict parameters of having to be strategic, or you know, having to be meet a certain

function in their role, then their exploration was really limited, right? That their parameters were relatively in familiar boundaries. And for me, that's, that's actually adapting, that's not being agile. If you're going to be truly agile, you have to go out side of those into unfamiliar territory, right? And then that fourth dimension is the stress tolerance dimension, which is managing, managing anxiety and stress and discomfort along the way. Because what happens with curiosity is there's an immediate cognitive appraisal process that you go through, which is, hey, this looks different or unfamiliar, or something's changed that requires me to go have to get some information or an experience. And the second appraisal that you do really quickly is do I have what it takes to manage the stress? Or what I might find along the way? How am I going to integrate that? And in that way, duress is almost a double loop learning process, because if we don't go through that experience, then you're not going to have a larger thought action repertoire to dive in the next time. Yeah. And so we're by by just kind of staying in our lanes executing, we're actually doing ourselves a disservice because we can't we can't prepare for the future, then we're always in reactive mode. And so that's where if functionally, it has to be prioritized, right? As a team as a leader, you as leader, how are you prioritizing that for yourself and for your team? Yeah, really?



Murielle Machiels 14:31

Oh, lot of leaders, they they want the creativity, the agility, the curiosity, but they're not in this right place to get it because they have their calendar fully booked five days a week and they're even working at night and during the weekend. So what according to your experience, what are their big curiosity? killers, what is really killing curiosity in organizations?



Dr. Alison Horstmeyer 15:06

So top down decision making. So what I, when I work with leaders who tend to be in the weeds a lot, right, they're there, they say that we are too busy to step back to vit to be the vision to, like, take time to, to craft the strategy and to be the vision holder. And that's what's we're told that is required in the vuca world. And that typically means they are not developing their team, they're not delegating. There may be trust issues, or confidence issues. So if you're the leader who's always doing, then you're training your team to go, okay, every time I have a problem, my boss is going to solve it out for me. And, you know, I call it the exchange of monkeys, they take one monkey off their back and put it on the monkey of, of the leader, and then leaders like, oh, why, why am I Why is my calendar so book? Why am I in all these meetings? And so getting really clear on you know, what's your role? As a leader, your role as a leader is to establish,



16:16

though,



Dr. Alison Horstmeyer 16:17

the why and the what, right? Here's our vision, here's our direction, you guys figure out the how, and, and in that process, stepping back and finding the time where, you know, the leaders make the space for reflection, and thinking about the future and evolution and what's needed, are the ones that actually feel more energized. Right. And, and they are seeing where, you know, do I need to do I need a tiger team, for example, to focus on this particular innovation. So that there's, there's strategies to figure out that's what's best for your, for your vision, but if you don't even have that, then we can can't start activating that that level of not knowing exploration, openness and stress tolerance. Yeah.



Murielle Machiels 17:13

Yeah, exactly. And, and what I noticed, and I think Steve Jobs said it is you often connect the dots only when you're looking back. And that's what I noticed, when I was a CEO, in my previous business in this business, it's like, I, I'm doing things and in the beginning, they don't seem related. And yeah, certain points, everything comes together, and you think, ah, like, that's why I was doing this. thoughts. Yeah.



Dr. Alison Horstmeyer 17:46

It's true. Um, and in the process, so when you're a CEO, you know, how did you? How did you embrace failure and experimentation? What was? What was, what did you model and what did you support



Murielle Machiels 18:02

her, I really had to change myself as a leader, because I used to be this good student, where as a good student, you had to foresee everything in advance, and you couldn't make any mistakes. So making mistakes for me or making mistakes, or my team making mistakes was really bringing a lot of anxiety. So rationally, I knew it, we had to make mistakes. Yeah, with the high pressure and this habit that making mistakes is creating. Yeah, a lot of tension in my body. I really had. That's why at a certain point, like you, I decided to go and do a, a coaching training in the US, where I worked with my emotions and my body because I knew that the answer wasn't in my head. If I wanted to become

the leader that was necessary to successfully transform my organization for the digital times. I had to learn things but somatically not to rationally. Yeah. Yeah,

D

Dr. Alison Horstmeyer 19:16

I mean, that's so beautiful, right? I mean, it there is so much work to be done because we are so conditioned to perform. And, and certainly we want to deliver business results and, and perform in a way that's in service of our team and our organization and our clients. But we tend to then really embrace conformity. And in their research, you know, the more conformity the lower openness to change, and the more conformity the lower the well being, which makes sense because if you're in conformity mode, You're in error avoidance mode. And it's really about self preservation. Yeah. And what you're describing is I needed to shift to kind of a more integrated presence where I could be the Explorer doesn't mean you're not decisive and make decisions, you were just operating in a different way. That could say, Okay, let's find things out, in and instead of having to be perfect, because the perfect paradigm is so limiting. And that's when our anxiety goes up. And that's when we're not going to take any risks. So if we're in if we're an error, error management, where we get to get to experiments in in safe ways. And that's why they're usually in pilots or something manageable, right? Then our anxiety actually goes down, and our stress tolerance goes up, because we're having those experiences to build their resilience. But, you know, it is a choice by the leader on, you know, what are the rules of engagement, I'm going to set with my team around taking risk? And how clear Have I been about that? And how can we agree, the, you know, as, as a commitment, like really a contract between us that this is what risk looks like, and I'm going to commit to support them and that so, you know, there's, there's clarity that needs to be said, to create that psychological safety to do those. take those risks and to make them mistakes. And so then you went back and modeled like, Okay, this is, this is what's okay, right, um, I was reading an article with the, the chief, one of the, I think, was the head of human resources for Novartis. And they were, he was describing what happened, you know, as the pandemic hit there. They had manufacturing issues and, and whatnot. And he said, what he noticed was the leaders that said, Okay, this is the direction we need to go. But I have no idea how we're going to get there,



22:18

who's got ideas,

D

Dr. Alison Horstmeyer 22:19

those were the teams that could innovate quickly.



Murielle Machiels 22:22

Yeah. But what I also noticed that it wasn't sufficient to tell people it's okay to make mistakes and not be angry when a mistake is made. It wasn't sufficient. I also developed a whole program around increasing energy and decreasing stress. Yeah, because that's the only way people only when you feel good and you make a mistake, then you're able to let go, when to think it's okay. But if you're completely stressed, although it's okay to make a mistake, it's, I mean, you have been punished for making mistakes for 20 3040 or 50 years. Yeah. Then suddenly, we tell you, no, it's okay. But your your buddy doesn't know. So that's energy was really important. Yeah,



Dr. Alison Horstmeyer 23:15

I mean, it's certainly a practice, it's not going to happen overnight, and it takes repetition. And so when I'm working with individual executive executives, and teams, you know, I'm very much of the view that this is this is a practicum, we are going to practice, debrief, evaluate, reflect, and later on, and then it is a journey, we this is not something that happens overnight. And different people are going to process it in different ways. But certainly, I've noticed that, you know, core values play such an important role in how we're curious. And so if we've established, the team values that we've all agreed on the dieser basically the rules of engagement, because values inform behavior more than facts and rationale. And then we then we have language around behavior that might be violating those values. So you could say, Hey, I observed that this value looks like it's in jeopardy, what should we do about it might they need it kind of takes the the charge off of making it like a personal attack. But I also noticed in my working and when I have executives that they really value security, then I have to look at what their what other values that they embrace, like courage or persistence, because I need them those values to kind of amplify a bit to offset the security because security is an anxiety inducing value. Right? Because, again, they want to feel safe in order to stretch. And so there's a little bit of a text I'm not saying you can't have values like security and tradition. But just knowing that there's that there is that anxiety inducing factor to them, and then looking at, you know, what are the other values that can help lift those up? at certain times? So I haven't seen a lot more time on values work, because I just seen the power of it.



Murielle Machiels 25:17

Yeah, yeah, I also pay a lot of attention to values and team values, organizational values,

but even personal values are important. The fact that you know, what is important to you, then suddenly, things? Yeah, that used to be important. Once you know, what is truly important. Doesn't seem to matter that much anymore. Yeah.

D

Dr. Alison Horstmeyer 25:42

And yeah, it definitely a great tool to figure it really helps to inform because what I'm hearing what you are, you're saying what I'm seeing too is that really helps inform how to allocate your focus time and energy. Yeah, you get really clear on what's what's important. And then that that, like, Oh, I don't have the time I'm being so sucked into all these different directions, then you're like, oh, wait a minute. How does that align with what we agreed is our values and our focus and our vision, then then the kind of gets clearer? How you should be allocating your times?



Murielle Machiels 26:19

Yeah. Now, what would you say then to a team that is coming to you? And that said, that would say, yeah, we want to increase curiosity in our organization. But yeah, we are working all the time, we are very busy. We have very high pressure to deliver the results on the short term. So how can we increase our curiosity without giving up the short term results? I guess you have teams like that, that come to you? Yeah, so

D

Dr. Alison Horstmeyer 26:55

the way I work is, it's not to be disruptive in terms of their their roles, and I really appreciate that there's competing priorities. And so this is why I structure more of a practicum. where, you know, we get clear on, you know, what is what is it that they're really wanting to change as a team? And, you know, kind of what are what, what's really going on in terms of the interaction of the team currently, and, and why why are they wanting to change? And what like, what do they believe curiosity is going to do so just kind of understanding the, the aspiration and the what's the request, fundamentally, and what's what's the change, or the outcome that they're hoping to achieve by by bringing in Cheerio, curiosity, you know, a team I worked with last year, they were Engineering Leadership Team, this, you know, we really want, we want our engineers to Excel to challenge the status quo to push back to be more open to experimenting. And for us to just be a better connected leadership team, because we're new. Um, and so. So that was, that was really clear. And because they were a new leadership team, we could go through the values process with them. And I just did that for for another team that's actually been working together quite some time, but posts, you know, trans COVID, they just felt like

they they had lost, lost each other lost communication, less collaboration. And then I designed it in a way where that we're going to come together for a little bit of time to get some initial concepts and, and I have certain models that I use, but it usually starts or have to start with them, and their self awareness about themselves before I can get them in this in the awareness of how, how interacting with each other and interacting with key stakeholders what that would look like when applying that work. So we do it in sprints, where we come together, do experiential sessions together as a cohort, and and then they establish kind of their personal goals for for that program. And what I mean by personal goals is they have to really be clear on those moments that matter in their role, where applying this of these models can be the most productive and beneficial for them. So it's not additive. It's very much the Josh person in the flow of work practice. So this isn't something extra that they're doing. This is something they're integrating into their role, and they have to go do it. So then there's a real world practice part. And then I integrate integration coaching, so whether that's pairing people up 14 coaching because it's a great way to learn from each other. Right and be supportive. I can't tell you how many times I've heard like, oh, wow, you're experiencing that too. So good to know, right? That I'm not alone in this. Yeah. And then doing and then doing coaching with the leader, and then you know, doing the cadence that way. So it's manageable. So they're practicing, they're having to pivot on their own and continue to ladder. So, so the concepts and the models are universal, they're getting common language that they're using with each other. So around biases and other things where they can start sharing that with their teams, which is, which is also part of like train the trainer a little bit. But it's, it's, it's a cadence where it's really about supporting what they're actually doing in their roles. So not making it like extra something extra, because that that's not going to be helpful.



Murielle Machiels 30:54

Yeah. Nice. And where can people find you then if they want to know more about you and about what you do?



Dr. Alison Horstmeyer 31:03

Sure. So they can go to my website. So it's Dr. Allison h. So Dr. Li, s o n h calm, and they can also reach out to me on LinkedIn.



Murielle Machiels 31:15

Okay, great. We will put it in the show notes of of this episode. So that Okay, wonderful. Well, thank you very much. This was very interesting. I also loved the the forum points to

curiosity. I never thought about it that way. Good. Yeah. I think people will get a lot out of it. Because Yeah, like you said, it's, it has become so important to be curious. In a world that is so unpredictable, like no, people. Yeah, COVID is coming, hopefully, to an end, it looks like that's in in Europe, and I guess in the US as well. But a lot of CEOs, I don't know how work will look like because yeah, people don't want to go back to the office. So to be hybrid teams, but how will that function? So you will need a lot of curiosity there as well, if you want to make it work and not an and not make the mistake, like some CEOs think Well, we're going to force people to come back to the office, and I don't believe that is the answer. So curiosity is so important in everything we do in Yeah, and this disruptive world we're currently living in there, there is no going back to normal, we have to move forward for a bounce forward and create new and create new ways of being and doing and interacting. And, yes, the hybrid workplaces is here to stay. And there's a way to really leverage that. Yeah. Well, yeah, it is gonna take some experimentation. We're not going to get it right out the gate. Oh, no, no. And it's going to be different probably for every organization.



Dr. Alison Horstmeyer 33:08

Yeah. Depending on your industry, your organization. I'm not saying there's a blanket response, certainly what what each business needs will vary. But that's that's also like, bouncing forward. Not going



Murielle Machiels 33:26

for not bouncing back. Good old. Yeah, exactly. Forward. Well, thank you, Alison, it was really nice having you on this podcast. Oh, thank you so much. I really enjoyed our conversation. Thank you. So this was again, a great conversation. And I've never thought about curiosity this way. Just as a reminder, the four elements of curiosity are first the not knowing being okay with not knowing, then secondly, becoming an explorer because not knowing is insufficient. We need to explore new possibilities, gather new information. Then the third element is openness, being open to new ideas being open to experimenting, and the last one, really reduce your stress. And here again, I know I'm talking about it very often the importance of energy. But when you are very stressed when you are being in discomfort because of a new idea that maybe it's there but you don't feel very comfortable with it yet. Well, then you want to have curiosity, neither and we all know how important it is to be curious if we want to be innovative or if we want to be HL as a leader and as an organization. So stay tuned and leave me a review. If you haven't done it yet. I would really appreciate it and subscribe because then you will receive the next episode automatically

