

Dave:

And welcome back to the 2021 version of the Plaintext podcast, getting things back up and running again. And I really welcome everyone back to join us for this podcast. This is the first iteration where we may not have video. We're trying it right now hopefully it works out for us, but with me today is a good friend of mine that I've known for quite a few years now. We have with us Casey Ellis, who is the founder, chairman and CTO of Bugcrowd. Welcome aboard. How's it been?

Casey:

Hey, it's good, man. Good. That opening track may be miss int eighty. I had some sort of mid 2020 Vegas FOMO and it just got tweaked on there, but I love that intro. It's awesome man. It's great to chat to you as well.

Dave:

Oh, you too. When we consider it's been over a year since I last sat down with you. That was at ShmooCon actually last year.

Casey:

That's almost exactly a year. You're right.

Dave:

That's crazy. Yeah, no, I was really happy that Dave was able to do that intro for me. It was a little bit of a happy moment. Does remind me back to the Vegas days for sure.

Casey:

We'll get back there at some point I'm sure. But it's very cool.

Dave:

Oh, absolutely looking forward to my job. So the whole premise of Plaintext is to talk about things that have shaped who you are being the interviewee in building your career and what lessons you've learned along the way. And a lot of this is to share information with a wider audience. Typically, when I started this out the whole idea was focusing on CSOs directly, but now I'm actually widening that out because I think this deserves a broader conversation from multiple different facets. And I want to make sure that we are sharing our lessons learned with a wider audience, because I think everybody has the potential to benefit from these conversations. Obviously everybody's journey is different. That's an understatement in of itself, but how did it all get started for you?

Casey:

Yeah. I love the premise and I'm a big... Probably, it's actually part of how I think about what you're doing with this podcast is the beginning of the answer to the question. I've always been a huge believer in the pursuit of potential. The idea that there's so many things that can be done and that everyone who gets about, kind of gets about almost pregnant with all this incredible stuff, that they're in the process of figuring out how to manifest and unleash on the universe.

Casey:

And for me that's myself included, but it's also a part of what I consider to be my mission or my drive is to try to draw that stuff out of others. So that's the baseline thing, and I think that's been really ever since I was kid. But from a career standpoint, my old man was a science teacher, my mom is actually now a master's in psychology. They were both entrepreneurs growing up. So actually dad was a teacher and then basically broke bad started doing his own thing. So I was always around this environment where there's a lot of learning, a lot of chaos, a lot of just figuring things out as you go and was just very comfortable with that. Did about six weeks of a science degree out of high school because that's what you were meant to do.

Casey:

And then dropped out, got into IT as an apprenticeship. And then really the security career started from there. So that went on for a period of time. I had the good fortune of marrying a incredible woman who shares that view around potential. She got with me at one point and said, "Hey, you're computer good but people good too. I don't think you realize that that's not something everyone necessarily can do. You should try your hand out the front of the house and see how you like the business and the sales side of things." And I did, and it works. And really those two sets of experience got together, and I got it in my head I wanted to be an entrepreneur. So that was when that whole journey started, which was actually in 2008.

Casey:

So it's just as everything's kind of hitting the fan. Thinking about the security market and thinking about the fact that external existential things that are floating around tend to make people think more about risk, and it actually creates an opportunity to build something that you can do a better job than what was happening before. So that's the as I grew up version of the story.

Dave:

Excellent. Well, and it's really interesting you touch on those points about dealing with risk, as well as dealing with the human element, whether or not you intended to say that at the time, it's just how we interact with folks around us, within their business, outside of our business. This is one thing that I've found that doesn't always get all the attention it should. And especially when we take into account the pandemic that we've been going through. Making sure that we are there for folks that are working remotely, that may not have ever done it before.

Casey:

Yeah. A 100%. 2020, not to diminish like all of the heartache and the actual physical sickness and all that stuff going on, so I don't want to in any way make light of that. But I do see it's like my founder spidey senses got tingling pretty quickly into the whole thing. Because the ubiquity of disruption, it's almost like we all got pushed over the hump on a whole bunch of things that were going to happen in the future anyway, we just weren't necessarily universally comfortable with them. Podcasting you and I are both kind of old hand at this type of thing, but for a lot of folks they've not wanted to use it because it's just not their native territory and all of a sudden they've been forced to.

Casey:

There's all of these difference versions of that going on and what that does is basically accelerates digital transformation on a personal level and on a corporate level. And to your point as well helping people out with... I wrote a thing back in April of 2020 around the how to for digital boomers on work from

home and corporate culture and different things like that. Because the folks that are doing this for the first time, it's still I think a lot of the time quite a challenging thing to wrap your head around if you haven't come from it.

Dave:

Oh, absolutely. Especially when you consider most of these folks before the pandemic hit they would work from home the occasional Friday and nothing to the degree that you and I are used to. Absolutely this is quite a challenge across the board, but I think a lot of good has come out of it as well. Being able to prove demonstrably to senior management that, yes, an organization can function in a remote-

Casey:

Yes. Yes.

Dave:

... sense by and large.

Casey:

And the challenge then comes to teach senior management how to lead across that and how to manage across that. Because then the flip side of it is we're spending 26 hours a day on Zoom. Because folks that aren't used to it are trying to replace the water cooler, that's not quite how it works but there's still I think a journey happening around that as well.

Dave:

Yeah. And that's where a lot of different types of chat programs will help to keep that constant communication with coworkers and that, so that people don't feel isolated. And we have to take those risks out there in order to get things better. And you and I are no aliens to doing risk that's for sure.

Casey:

That's true.

Dave:

We at both at one point in our lives played in bands.

Casey:

Yes. Yep. That is true.

Dave:

And what brought that on and what did you play?

Casey:

So yeah, actually, so this is the other... I mentioned my parents before the other thing about them is they actually they're both old rockers. They literally met on the road-

Dave:

That's cool.

Casey:

... and that's how they got together and eventually got married. My dad's a drummer, my mom she plays everything. And I started banging on pots and pans when I was probably three or four years old, started learning properly just before my teens and got into bands and doing stuff like that. So drums, audio engineering as well, done and a ton of that stuff because I think it's a weird drummer quote but we don't have stuff to plug in. So we tend to end up missing with everyone else's tools. So I definitely followed that path and played little bit of everything, but drums are what I'll do in front of a group of people.

Dave:

And that's one thing that I've discovered in the years that I've been doing this, is a lot of times I will run across security practitioners that have started out in music, or at least have some sort of link to music. And I think a lot of this lends itself to people's way of thinking. And when you have a nonlinear fashion of thinking, I think that actually helps with security.

Casey:

I've thought a lot about this Adrian Sanabria wrote a post a bunch of years back that that kind of set me on this track thinking about it because I completely agree. You clearly have as well. From my perspective, there's really extreme bits to it there's the creative part, which I think is the part that's obvious. Then there's the part that music is actually math. It's literally math assembled in a way that's artistic and appealing and that can basically not present as math because music also I think cuts across thinking and speaks directly to soul. So being able to actually produce that and be a part of that, I think there's a certain set of worrying that gets baked in as a part of that. And then the third is leadership because as a drummer, if people know that I'm there I'm probably doing it wrong. You knew what I mean?

Dave:

Unless you're Neil Peart.

Casey:

Unless you're doing a solo there's times and places to flash out and do you saying of course. But the real thing there is to actually basically serve the song, which is there to serve the audience. And you're doing that with a group of people and you've got this incredibly loud punchy thing to do it with. There's a lot, I think, as I've gone through the process of founding Bugcrowd, learning how to be CEO, transitioning into chairman, trying to create a category in the market, all these different things that have happened over the past eight or nine years.

Casey:

Where I've actually mapped it back to the experience of playing in bands on stage for 15 years prior to that, where it all comes in together. I think it's not necessarily that you need to be a musician to have this sort of thing available to you. I think there's equivalents in sport and all sorts of other different areas, but that particular kind of muso crossover I agree it does tend to be a thing.

Dave:

Yeah. I think it lends itself very much to the manner of thinking and how people approach problems and very much what you were saying. And when you're in a band, everything comes together and coalesces and very much in the same vein as what you've built at Bugcrowd. So for those of our listeners who may not be familiar what does a quick little spiel about what Bugcrowd does?

Casey:

Yeah. So Bugcrowd effectively, what we do is to pioneer the space of a crowdsource security as a service. So when we started what I was looking at was the fact that there's all these... Like this incredible wide hacker community all around the world. And then you've got this amazing and growing demand for creative input into cybersecurity. You touched on it before. One of the tropes that I throw out a lot and I do fundamentally believe this is true, is that cybersecurity is actually a human problem, the technology just makes it go faster. Because you think about it people making mistakes that make them vulnerable, that predates the internet by a couple of thousand years, at least.

Casey:

And then people exploiting that that's also not a new thing. So we're just a part of an evolution of that whole kind of idea out in market and really humans are at the center of it. So you've got this huge group of people, this huge latent potential, this huge unmet demand. And it's unplugged from each other because we've been telling hackers, they should go away and they might go to jail and all of these different things in the past. But really what Bugcrowd was about plugging those two things in together, that latent potential and the unmet demand.

Casey:

And then the other piece to it, which is something that I'm more active on these days is impacting and influencing the policy side of it that basically [inaudible 00:13:29]. So the whole idea of people that hack in good faith, the idea of a digital locksmith is still not... We've made a ton of progress and it's still not commonly understood, it's definitely not reflected in law. So how can we get at this point where the bad guys still have walls and deterrence around them doing bad stuff, but the folks that are trying to do it to help can actually do that in a way that's safe, in a way that's just more normal really is the goal.

Dave:

And that's absolutely fantastic especially when I look back to you 15 odd years ago when I was doing security research, I was one of those folks that would have companies say, "All right if you publish this we will see you into oblivion."

Casey:

Yep. Yep.

Dave:

Absolutely vexing because it wasn't a case of me trying to get notoriety for myself. It was like, I found a genuine problem. I brought it to-

Casey:

I want to actually help you.

Dave:

Yeah, absolutely. I've had a research done with vendors like the one I work for now Oracle and others, but there was one that would really stuck out in my mind was Websense. I found an issue with them, brought it to them. They fixed it in under two hours. And I thought that was absolutely amazing and they said, "Thank you." And I was like, "That's all I wanted just that it got fixed. That was fantastic." So that's why I think Bugcrowd really does serve an excellent niche because to be fair 15 years ago, I never imagined something like this would come along and it's really cool.

Casey:

Thank you. Even at the start of the business we started it from Sydney, Australia, which is the accent we all hear. And then moved across to San Francisco about six months after we actually got into an accelerator program and it all kind of went from there, did the venture back thing and it continues on today. So we're running bug bounty programs for folk, we're running home disclosure programs for folk. And then we're diversifying the use cases for how we can apply the crowd to solving security problems so pen test and the tax surface mapping and a range of other things.

Casey:

Really at the very beginning, it was like, "Okay this thing's either going to catch on fire and fail because it's a pretty drastic idea." If you wind the clock back eight years I think now it's fairly normal, but at that point in time we were kind of the first to do it. So it's like this could work really well because it's clearly a solution that is available and is needed. We just don't know if the market's going to accept it or not. And we don't necessarily know even necessarily how safe it is if you try to corral it and so far so good. I think that's the thing that I'm most proud of, very proud of the company growth we've raised 80 some odd million dollars. We've got a bunch of employees all around the world and do work with the Pentagon and financial services companies, different governments around the world, different things like that.

Casey:

Are actually part of helping out to write the BDP policy for the 2020 general elections around voting infrastructure, which was a bit of work that I was very proud of this all in terms of our part that we played in that. But the biggest thing is the fact that that cat's out of the bag now, the fact that hackers are helpful and are actually being considered as more of a when and how then than an if. I feel like we were very much responsible for aspects of that and that's something I'm pretty proud of.

Dave:

And you should be you're helping to flip the script from the negative stigma that we see that's associated with hackers. And I've always seen that as somebody who has an innate curiosity about how things work.

Casey:

Yeah. Yeah.

Dave:

It's as simple as that.

Casey:

Exactly. There's all this debate around hacking is not a crime, which I love as a mantra because I was a skateboarder in the '90s and I get what the throwback reference is there, but by the same token skateboarding on a freeway is illegal.

Dave:

Also not wise.

Casey:

And also kind of dumb so maybe don't do that, but the whole idea of just hacking being taken from being this default, morally loaded scary thing to, "Okay, this is just a set of wirings that people have that make them curious about technology and that's very powerful and very useful, how does that fit? And it also can be used for some really evil stuff too." So how do we acknowledge the good versions of that? And actually give them a context and make them safe, that's a pretty cool mission to be on I like it.

Dave:

Excellent. Well, and bearing in mind that you're doing your part to help flip the script. One of the things I'm finding now is senior management is more attuned to the fact that we are not here to break things for a negative purpose. So they're now seeking counsel. Now, do you find that a lot with senior security management coming to you for advice and guidance and if so, what is their biggest concern?

Casey:

Yeah. Yes, definitely. From all sorts of different places too. It ranges from startups and folks that are post Facebook, cloud native. Even now there's like newer things that have been laid on top of that they're not thinking waterfall or kind of legacy, they're thinking about what they're going to build that's new. But then also your larger kind of organizations, governments, and people trying to approach this from a policy standpoint, probably the two big things. One is just the overall businesses view of risk based security, which is something that folks have been talking about for a long time. I feel like it was a cool kid's idea up until about 2017, 2018 where we all looked around and thought, "We're screwed if we don't prioritize."

Casey:

So how do we use risk to help us decide what's important and what's not because the reality is we're not going to get around to all of it. So that's one big thing. And part of that is how do you turn security into more than just an insurance policy, it's protecting the back door like how do you actually start to differentiate based on what you're doing in reality in a way that has your product stand out? I think that's partly driven by the fact that within a table conversation right now, that wasn't always true. Do you know what I mean? We actually landed in the US the same month Snowden did his thing, which I had no part in that but the timing of it was interesting.

Casey:

Because I look back on that as the moment that the world collectively, I think first had the thought that hacking is a thing that does actually affect them on a personal level I'm talking about at the dinner table and then it just escalated from that. So there's that, I think the other but is just and it's sort of related, the whole idea that basically humans are awesome but we make mistakes. So this idea that, traditionally, I think ostrich risk management has been the default, and it goes back to secure your

session all those other things, some of the ways that people react. It's like if we just don't acknowledge or don't talk about the problems that we have then we won't have to deal with them.

Casey:

And I think over the past five years in particular, that's been shown to be less and less true over time. So the other question I get a lot is, "How do I tell that story into the business in a way that doesn't get me fired?" Because at the same time, it feels like I'm admitting that I haven't been doing a good job this whole time, but the reality of it is that flaws and weaknesses exist in technology because humans put it there and that's just the truth. So how do we get better at that?

Dave:

And fundamentally we've built our collective careers on failures. And when I say that I mean things went wrong we learn from them and we evolve from that point. And so to penalize folks for saying, "Maybe we should be doing this way to improve things." It really is a detriment to the organization overall. So I think that blaming people for things that go wrong, like interns, is not going to improve the conversation in any way, shape or form.

Casey:

Listen man. Listen.

Dave:

[inaudible 00:21:51].

Casey:

It's wrong, but it's a hump that you've got to get over. There's a humility that you've got to basically I think almost invariably, voluntarily, except. Unless you've been owned from the outside and you get pushed over the hump, you've got to basically choose to accept that state of, "Yeah, we're not perfect."

Dave:

Nobody is.

Casey:

But if you're coming from a state of we are perfect then that's an awkward transition to make. And I think that's honestly, I see that particular hump is the root cause of a non-trivial percentage of the weakness and the opportunity for the bad stuff to go down in the cybers that we see today. It's just because people feel like they haven't needed to do it because they're fine. So getting people over that hump I think is the important part. Because it's like, "Hey, I've got bad news, but it's actually good news because now you can do something about it."

Dave:

Yeah. There's a lot of truth in that because all of the interconnected systems, the news that we're referring to obviously is was about solar winds, but that could have conceivably happened to any piece of software. They were just the ones that had the bad luck.

Casey:



And the intern thing we see Bugcrowd works with a lot of different organizations and we see a lot of stuff, and that particular set of issues that was getting called out that's everywhere. Literally everyone has that, regardless of how good they think they are at security, it's just the thing that happens because people do that. So the question becomes how do you operate on the assumption that it has happened, mitigate it as much as you possibly can and then to your point try to learn how not to do it again.

Dave:

Yeah. And don't throw rocks in glass houses of course.

Casey:

Yeah. And so blame the intern.

Dave:

Exactly. So one of the interesting things about what we do and when we are front towards a public audience, my friend, your friend of mine, Alex Hutton he said, "We are caricatures of ourselves on social media." And this has always stuck with me. So the question I have to put to you is what is one of the biggest misconceptions that people have about you when they meet you in person?

Casey:

Well, I'm six foot six.

Dave:

Yeah. I know my neck still hurts from looking up.

Casey:

That's probably the first thing that I wouldn't necessarily call it a misconception, but it's almost the invariable. Folks that I've known from IFC or Twitter or whatever else they'll be like, "Holy crap. You're tall." That's just the thing that happens. Probably not what you meant, but it's very consistent. Wow. I think, I just really love people. And I think a lot of the stuff that I'll go on about. I do mentorship things and help people's startups, and help people build their career and security industry. And a lot of the stuff that I interact with folk on, on the Twitters and whatnot is to that end, which probably gives people an idea of the fact that that's a core drive of mine. But then I'm also Aussie and not shy to call bullshit, security snark and all this other stuff.

Casey:

So this idea of like, "Oh, I thought you were really angry about everything." And you're actually not, you're actually pretty optimistic. I think that's something that a lot of security people probably experience a similar thing. That's something that I've seen come up a little bit because there is... There's the subject matter and then there's this persona that you attach to it that is as close to who you actually are as you can get it I think. I like how Hutton put that because I think it's right. You have to reduce it to a caricature in some ways because you've only got so much time and space to get that stuff out. So you start to learn what works and narrow in on that a little bit. My grandpa had this expression, "Truth need never war with itself." Which I just love and try to live by because I think that goes to... As much as you can integrate who you really are with what you're putting out the less you'll have to manage.

Casey:

And honestly, if you selecting people out in the process that might even be a good thing. So all of a sudden you've got this integrated thing that you can just almost get out of the way, so that you can focus on your strengths and focus the things that you actually want to get done. I try to hold to that as close as I can and it's not perfect because obviously being in the public eye you've got to manage that stuff, and there's things that you learn from that process as you go along but that's the general approach to that kind of thing.

Dave:

Excellent.

Casey:

Plus I'm really tall. So there's [crosstalk 00:27:04].

Dave:

That always helps me. You can get things off of high shelves for me. Lord. Okay. So we're rounding down to the end of this and I'm absolutely appreciating the time that you've taken with me today to talk about these things. But one of the things that always comes up when I have conversations with people in the wider world of how to do what we do. What is the biggest piece of advice that either you got, or you're willing to share based on your experience that would help people in their own careers?

Casey:

There's so many of them, so this is why I'm trying to because I'm trying to give you a crisp answer on this one. In everything you can do work to build your confidence in how you get it out there because everyone's faking it to some degree if they're trying to try to innovate. Faking it's the wrong way to put it. Everyone's pushing their boundaries and that's when imposter syndrome kicks in or other stuff. Another phrase that I'll throw around that if you don't feel imposter syndrome, you probably not trying anything new.

Dave:

That's true.

Casey:

So that from just a confidence and actually getting comfortable with that I've had someone really sow that into me early on, and I think that's really helped. Another is that simple is strong. Communication really is the essence of most things getting done. So the more you can actually work on that and cultivate not necessarily spoken communication or IRL because not everyone's comfortable with that. But just distilling down the value of what you're trying to do, so you can package it up and articulate it. I think that's a thing that I observed working really early on and I've put a lot of focus into because value is value. Like everything is marketing and sales in some way, it's marketing that's making people aware of a potential solution to their problem.

Casey:

And sales is convincing them to actually undertake it, that doesn't necessarily need to involve the exchange of cash, it's just a process that people go through so communication feeds up into that. And I

think that's really underrated in our space because we get very tied up in the tech because it's cool, and it's fun and we can do really neat things with it. But that whole idea of building in those... I don't even want to call them soft skills it gets rendered like that, but I think that actually diminishes it to call it soft. Because it's like the hard skills are more real and more important, no they're both actually pretty critical.

Dave:

It's a symbiotic relationship. For sure.

Casey:

Yes. So really simple is strong is as much as I can narrow that down, in what you're working on and what you do and how you communicate. The other is focus that's always been a big one because I'm distracted by shiny objects and people and things that could be cool opportunities. I think a lot of people in this space as well have to work with that and just to say, "Hey dude, focus. That isn't necessarily always helpful." But checking to see if you are along the way, I think that's something that was a pretty important piece of advice as well.

Dave:

Cool. Now I'm perfectly guilty of that. Ooh, look at the shiny. Ooh, look at the kitty.

Casey:

I think we all are. It's a thing. It's why we're all on Twitter like ranting at each other.

Dave:

Exactly. Actually, now that you mention Twitter. Where can people find you if they're not already following you.

Casey:

Yeah. Sure. So Bugcrowd is bugcrowd.com. I'm Casey John Ellis, J-O-H-N. On the Twitters personal website is cje.io.

Dave:

Cool. And I just want to say that my wife... My wife, sorry, my daughter still wears her. Excuse me. Grace Opera has a policy t-shirt and she absolutely loves it.

Casey:

That's awesome.

Dave:

So thank you for putting that one out there.

Casey:

I love hearing that.

Dave:

Awesome. Well, thank you so much for being here. I'd like to thank everybody for tuning in and I look forward to hearing from you, or chatting with you all again at another time in the future. Be safe out there.

Casey:

Thanks Dave appreciate it.

Dave:

Thanks Casey.