JAMES: And I think that's an ideal metaphor for any leader really, you need to know your stuff. You need to be strategically sound, technically smart. You need to know the business. You need to know everyone else's business as well as they do, all of all of that. You know, but it's not enough. You also need to be able to connect and relate and care and have empathy and compassion, be the kind of the value center of that organization.

CHRIS: Welcome to *No Turning Back*, a podcast hosted by General Stan McChrystal and myself, Chris Fussell. Our goal here is simple: to have serious conversations with serious leaders so that we can learn from the best and navigate these complex times together. Thanks for joining us.

ANNA: What can a New Zealand rugby team teach you about leadership? This week, Stan and Chris speak to James Kerr to discover the answer to that question. James Kerr, a bestselling author, speaker, and business consultant, brings an inquisitive mind and practical observations to the conversation.

Stan and Chris explore some of the lessons learned from James's best-selling book, Legacy: What the All Blacks Can Teach Us About the Business of Life, examining the symbols, rituals, practices, and values that made the All Blacks a successful rugby team. James Kerr's book has captivated audiences worldwide as the lessons transcend athletics - the book's final fifteen lessons are held close by leaders in every industry.

Beyond the All Blacks, Stan and Chris share interests in common with James, who specializes in high performing teams and leadership. James explains why smart leaders are great storytellers, draws an important distinction between humility as meekness and humility as confidence, and what CEOs can learn from coaches. James is an expert in his field, and was generous with his time. We thank him for the discussion.

Now, over to Stan.

STAN: James, thanks so much for joining us today. A few years ago, a friend of mine who used to command the 22 SAS, who you're very familiar with, and we have been together in combat in Iraq, sent me a book. And he sent me a book about rugby. And I thought, “Well, you know, what's up with this? I don't play rugby. Hm. I've never been to New Zealand. What do I care?” He said, “No, no, read the book.” And I read the book and yeah, of course it's a leadership book.

And one of the things that had jumped out at me is, in my career, particularly as you get more experience, you can go into a unit, and you don't need to be briefed by the commander. You don't need to see PowerPoint slides. You can walk through the areas. You can talk to the non-commissioned officers. You don't even have to really talk to many, you can just watch: how they interact, what their gear looks like, and you get this intuitive sense, whether it's a good unit or not.

And people say, “Well, no, units that perform well on the field or are good in combat don't necessarily reflect that all the time.” And, and that was not my experience. You can feel it. You

talked about the All Blacks, the concepts, well, 15 leadership lessons, but really the most famous one that people grab onto is sweeping the sheds.

Can you start there and tell us about organizations and basic values?

JAMES: For, for sure. First, thank you very much for having me on, and it's great to chat again. Sweeping the sheds to me, for those of you who don't know the story, the first test, international game I spent with the All Blacks, after the game they debrief, and then when it's time to go, rather than just grabbing their bags and heading for the coach, heading for the bus, the players, led by the senior players, grabbed long handled brooms and started tidying up after themselves.

And you have to imagine, you know, there was still a helicopter overhead, aiming to get kind of B Roll footage of them leaving the stadium. Kids going to bed dreaming of All Blacks glory, but the leading players and the leading team were kind of taking care of business.

And I asked afterwards, you know, I was new to the team, you know, obviously, to your point, you can see that culture kick into action. You can feel it. A sports psychologist I work with says it's, it's the crackle of the culture. It's that it's the, it's the vibe, the buzz, the, the, whatever it is.

And it's those small, off the ball things that really matter, I think. It's not the main event. It's the other stuff. It's the discretionary effort. It's the, it's the stuff behind the scenes that people take care of, not because they have to, but because they know it's the right way of doing. And I think that's a very, very clear signal of a really healthy culture and because healthy culture really is that selfless service for something that's bigger than ourselves, for the cause, or the mission or the team. And it's all of those small details that really make that difference when it comes to performance on the paddock.

CHRIS: James, can you talk a bit about, some of the… we'd love to get into the transferability of these ideas into other leadership sectors… I know you do a lot of thinking about that as well. One area that jumps out to me is the importance of, of symbols. It's very clear in sports. It's very clear in the military. I think it's clear to really good leaders in the corporate or other sectors, but it's not as intuitive. Something that stuck with me ever since I read *Legacy* was the players' description of the numbers they're wearing and understanding the legacy of who had worn it before them. In the, in the SEAL teams, you earn your warfare, insignia, the Trident, and it's, you know, it's a big golden eagle that you wear on your chest. And my first SEAL team, SEAL Team Two on the east coast in the US, as you walk out of the quarterdeck, the headquarters entry area, there was a plaque that had been up there since Vietnam that said, "Did you earn your Trident today?"

And that same sort of questioning about, you know, making you understand the importance of the symbols that you wear. And I'm curious if you've seen that idea evolve in other spaces outside of military or sport, or just, just really how they, how the All Blacks made that part of their culture.

JAMES: Yeah. I mean, I think if you can't, other than that crackle, that feel, you can't really see a culture, you know, in many ways. And if you look at the sociologists and the anthropologists, its cultures are really represented in three main ways: you know, verbalize, symbolize and ritualize. The language that we use, the kind of common, but uncommon language. The symbols, the badges of belonging, the, the insignia, the, those small symbols and signs of, of belief and belonging and ritual, those things that we do, every day, or sometimes we don't even know that we're doing. It might be in a corporate world. It might be drinks on a Friday night, often, or it might be the water cooler meeting that happens at 11 o'clock. You know, sometimes it's all my subconscious, I think. If you look at the, the psychology of it, and you look at the, so humanist psychology, it talks about that, that human beings, our organizations are living symbolic systems.

And, and that, the way we connect really is through the symbolism that we… the way we speak, the way we show ourselves, the badges we wear, the uniform we wear, whether that's ties or dress down Friday. So all of those things are extraordinarily important and they either act… they either arrived by default kind of, they just turn up, but they can also be shaped. And I think the military is a great example of the power of shaping some of those rituals. The Trident, I believe that the, the Eagle and the Trident has its head bowed. It's about humility. So, so it becomes symbolic of a, kind of a way of being, in a way of behaving.

And I think smart leaders are great storytellers. And, and I think one of the challenges is in that day-to-day life of just sort of doing the urgent stuff, the important stuff often becomes about… particularly now in times of pandemic of social distancing, how do you create cohesion? How do you create that common symbolic language?

And I think organizations that do that well… a couple of examples. Walmart, they closed down on a Saturday morning, once a month, now it used to be once a week, so that everybody is part of that same massive organization, but all at the same time. And that's a symbol, both symbol and ritual, I guess.

Often, it's the Employee of the Week or the, or the, or the, who gets the, in the UK, it's who gets the rounds for a drink on a Friday. They can be subtle and more social often, it's not as formal within a corporate environment that sort of reeks of kind of corporate behavioralism if you like, and that doesn't always connect people. But finding small ways of signaling belief and belonging and status and acknowledgement and recognition and reward, all of those small things go a long way in that kind of human dynamic of, am I part of this group, am I recognized by this group? Have I got a voice in this group? How do I belong? And, and that sort of sense of signaling belonging, I think becomes, you know, incredibly important, particularly in a world that's increasingly atomized, distanced, and sort of cellular in a sense.

CHRIS: Yeah, really powerful points there. Going back to, when you say leaders are storytellers, which I couldn't agree more with, have you, you've seen coaches do that, obviously in your study, the All Blacks and others. When you talk to corporate executives, are, do you, do you frame their role somewhat as a, as a coach? What sort of similarities do you see there?

JAMES: Well, I, I do kind of… there are a lot of models. There are a lot of leadership models, you know, actually, II think there was only one really, there was a, another military man, Bill Marshall Slim out of the UK says, you know, leadership as an intimate act that is just playing you.

So, it's your adaptive ability to connect, to communicate, to tell that story, to, to kind of be a dream catcher, if you like, and bring people along with you and, and that's a projection of personality. And that's that storytelling aspect, I think. I think, so, I'm not sure there is sort of a one model fits all, but I think the coaching metaphor, the kind of generative metaphor of the kind of coach CEO or the coach COO or the coach CFO, or, is a very powerful one because a coach, of course, coaches need to be directive at some, at some points, but they also need to be hugely empowering at other points. And really good coaches really are able to read the room fantastically well.

There's a couple of very interesting studies, one done at the Cleveland Indians and another done at John Hopkins, about what makes a good coach, what makes a good teacher? And there are three kind of key aspects. One technical competence, you know, you need to be good at the stuff, you know, you need to know your stuff, but a lot of the time that's where we get to as leaders. Sometimes that's about, you know, that, "Well, I'm good at what I do. Everyone should just recognize that." Well, let's step one. The second part of it is, is relational. Our ability to connect. To connect with people and to connect other people with each other.

And the third aspect is the ability to teach, to convey information, to tell that story. So, a good coaches really have those three zones, and I think that's an ideal metaphor for any leader. Really. You need to know your stuff. You need to be strategically sound, technically smart. You need to know the business. You need to know everyone else's business as well as they do all of that. You know, but it's not enough. You also need to be able to connect and relate and care and have empathy and compassion. Be the kind of the values center of that organization, represent the values of that group. But you also need to convey the right information to the right person and the right tone at the right time. And often that becomes a skill. The more competent you might be capable, often that skill of communication gets weaker perhaps. And so, I think there's a lot of skill building that can happen around that storytelling or, or leaders as teachers kind of zone, the coach CEO kind of zone. That in my experience working with corporate leaders is an area of tremendous growth. It's a tremendous possibility and growth. That's kind of the extra 10% on top of whatever else they're good at, that can really make a measurable difference in the impact that they have immediate on those immediately around them and then on the wider organization.

STAN: James, that that is really interesting. I'm going to pull you on leaders and symbology. I've had the opportunity to be in the Oval Office in the White House several times with different leaders and just walking in the room is a little bit intimidating and send you this signal that a great leader is going to come in. And I've also gone to see… Chris and I have made friends with Doug McMillon, the CEO of Walmart, and you mentioned Walmart.

JAMES: There you go.

STAN: We, we went down to his headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas, and I hope I don't offend him, it looks kind of like a 1960s elementary school in the United States. And you go in Doug's office, and it looks like the guidance counselor's office.

JAMES: Yeah.

STAN: It's eminently approachable. And so, can you talk about that symbology? Because sometimes we think if we're a leader, we need the symbols, we need the badges. We need the big office. We need the entourage. Talk about when…

JAMES: I think it's partly about positioning. You know, if you talk about an office that is like the counselor's office, you know, that's that, and it's accessible, that's the message that sends out clearly on that level. So I think it's very contextual. I think it's about the kind of position that you need to take andd the message that you need to send out. If I can just tell quickly a story from the world of sport, the first team I was embedded with and worked with was the Australian Kangaroos, the rugby league team, a fearsome fighting force, very, very successful, very masculine, if you like.

I turned up on, on the team bus, just after they'd lost the first test against the English, so against the line, and so they went a very happy bunch. And one of the guys, a prop, looked me up and down and I can't really repeat the language here, but who is this guy? He looked me up and down, and I was a young, young bloke and I kind of went, "Wow, this hasn't started very well," and I was sitting there kind of wreaking of humiliation at the front of the buses as it sort of trundled up the motorway. And then I felt a tap on my shoulder, and it was the coach, a guy called Bobby Fulton, who's recently passed away. They say Bobby plays just outside Jesus in the backfire. He's revered. And I felt a tap on my shoulder and, he sort of says, you know, "Jump up, son." And I stood up and he just handed, didn't say anything, he handed me a tie, a team tie, shook my hand and went back to his seat, no words.

But from that moment I was in that team. And, and so the power of signal, the power of symbol, the power of that small gesture, you know, he spoke volumes, it was a metaphor for he's one of us. And he and I, and he brought me into that environment extraordinarily easily and fluently in terms of the way he spoke an unspoken language, if you like. So, it might be as small as that. And, and there's a lot talked about culture, but I think one of the interesting distinctions is around climate. What is the sort of climate we create around ourselves? If you, if you think of a school, a school might have a great culture, but, but the classroom may not have a great climate or it may do.

And that's very personal. That's about the quality of the character of the human being who's influencing that. And I think that role modeling, that, who we, the being of a leader, if you like, is symbolic in its own, right? That kind of way we look at things, the way we listen, the way we pick up some, some litter, some, some trash in a corridor that we walk past. It's the, you know, that's the old, the old saying the stuff we walk past is the stuff we condone.

How do we set that example? How do we symbolize the being that we want our organization to be? And I think that's the first act of a leader and the first act of storytelling in a way, is that behavioral, some of the symbolism. And then a lot of those kinds of the kind of office we choose, or the kind of car we drive, or when we take our holidays or, whether we remember the janitor's name. All of those small, moment symbols, if you like, become a communications from a point of character and values. And I think if we can own that and understand that, our ability, the climate we create, and therefore the culture we create around ourselves, is measurably more powerful.

STAN: Incredibly important. I found, well, I got senior in the military. I actually learned that when I was younger, but reminding myself when I was senior, is we get more, more powerful. We become like dinosaurs and we develop this huge tail, but our brain doesn't get any bigger. And yet, when we turn, that tail can knock stuff over and have effect, we don't, we don't appreciate. And if your staff around you… if you say, "Is it okay if we change the entire schedule and go this way and that way," and the staff says, "Oh yes, oh great leader," not reminding you of all the things you are going to upset, people who prepare presentations for you and whatnot. Yeah. If they don't, if they don't keep you sensitive, and Chris and I were together in Iraq and Afghanistan, and one of the things that he was so good at was in many cases, he was me. He was the person actually transmitting and interacting with people and people would say, "Well, how is Stan McChrystal?" And they may actually never have spoken to me, but they interacted with the team that Chris led and that shaped that.

And I think leaders sometimes don't pay enough attention to that.

JAMES: Yeah, I think, I think you're absolutely right. And I think the, and you know, it does come down to a sort of an awareness, I think, and, and we, we need to be personally aware, but also it helps to have a Chris being aware on your behalf and, and having, you know, the, sort of the Caesar coming in on, on his triumph, into, into Rome having the, "This too will pass," whispered in your air is a particularly powerful thing because… but we talked about the sweep the shed story earlier, and I think that pays to another thing that I think is vital is, is that theme of humility. And humility, not as in meekness, but humility and the confidence to be humble - the kind of… it's an arrogant humility, if you like growth, confident humility. And that humility before the task, because hubris, as we know you from military tales from the ancients, you know, is the great enemy of high performance, of any kind of performance. And so managing to create a space around ourselves, in which you have somebody who can speak truth to power, can tell you that your dinosaur tail is smashing up, you know, the, the morale of a whole bunch of people, calling you on your stuff, is really vital.

And I think this is particularly actually within the corporate space. I think the military and sport is particularly good at calling people on their stuff. But there, there is a higher degree, I think, of kind of corporate anxiety, that, that exists within the plush carpets of the C-Suite.

Because it is a fragile, and can be a fragile existence, and there's a lot at stake and there can be a lot more politics and maybe the parameters aren't as well known, the hierarchies aren't as quite as well established. And that creates a certain amount of anxiety. And I think leaders, certainly

leaders I've worked with, one of the benefits that I bring, is that I can speak truth to power and call people on their BS. And so, you know, that dinosaur view yours it's wagging around because you like your golf, you know, or whatever, or because you know, you know where you're going, but you haven't communicated that outwards and why the intent often doesn't get kind of communicated. Then they are some of the most valuable conversations I think that leaders can have, they don't have to have an all the time, but they have to happen sometimes.

CHRIS: James, can you talk a bit more about the idea of ritual inside of organizations? Because I do think it's such an important point. Do, when you talk to leaders in a corporate space, do you ask them that question? Like, what are the, what are the rituals around here? Or do you look for them? Or, and I say this because I know I've seen, going back to like my military career, you would see leaders who knew you have to have a ritual, in a unit and they would sort of make them up and it didn't really work well.

Right. You can't just suddenly say, here's what we say after we go for a run. Right. Or whatever it is. It has to happen in a sort of organic fashion, but a leader also has to approach it thoughtfully. So how do you, how do you try to strike, how do you observe them and how do you try to coach leaders towards the importance of creating ritual?

JAMES: Yeah, I think, I think if this is about creating ritual, I don't think you create it, I think you reveal ritual. And I think to your point that, that, you know, there's the story of Michelangelo who carved away at marble, or he was asked how, how he managed to carve these extraordinary, you know, figures out of marble. And he said, well, I just chip away and there it is. You know, I kind of release it from within it. And I think there were a lot of kind of codes, the DNA of most groups, there are those sort of rituals, right, waiting to be kind of revealed often. And the ones that stick are the ones that are already there.

You know, otherwise it's like an organ transplant. The body will tend to reject it or go through the motions, which is even worse. So, a lot of rituals tend to be at the beginning and at the end of things. You know, the beginning of a week or the end of a week. Handshakes, or in the old days when we used to shake hands, or at the beginning of a conversation at the end of the conversation. The beginning of a career and the end of a career, or a posting or, or so on.

And so, I think it's a good place to start as kind of, how do you, when people enter a particular space or role or zone, what is, what is a ritual of kind of, what does that rite of passage moment? How do people step into it? … did something very simple and effective as they put nothing is impossible, uh, at the front of all of their buildings. So, you had to step into a place in which nothing is considered impossible. Very simple, kind of corny, kind of works. There are various things about, you know, passing, you know, I know in the SEALs, for instance, coming out of, of BUD/S, you know, the wannabe operators who have sort of survived, I guess, traditionally met by the, the bull frog, one of the oldest or the oldest serving SEAL, correct? And that is both a "come on in," you know, it's a rite of passage initiation, but it's also a metaphor for passing the bat. And I think that metaphoric aspect of ritual is incredibly important and it can't really be fake. Because if you, if you look at, you know, appreciative inquiry as a practice, a lot of that thinking is around what is that sort of generative metaphor that we can have at the center of what we do?

The All Blacks do it very well with the idea of leaving the jersey in a better place. It's a metaphor, but it's a, it's a purpose at the same time. And, and I think that comes back to that storytelling aspect. You know, you, you need to be looking out for it and you need to surround yourself with a little bit of talent because not everybody is a natural storyteller or a talented storyteller, but those that are, can recognize some of those moments and go, “you know, you can turn that into something.” Or, “that is something, let's just reveal that a little bit more. Let's carve that marble.” So it's both. It's not really a science, it's an art, I think is what I'm saying and it, and it comes out of the DNA of the, of the culture of the organization. So, I think the worst thing to do is to try to force it and force fit it.

It's got, gotta be a process of prevailing. I'm not sure if that answers your question, but, but maybe some food for thought.

STAN: James, I'm going to have you gie advice to a number of emerging leaders. We tend to work with a lot of companies where they started with energy as a very small team. They develop a product and they start to grow. And then one day they find themselves, they're an organization. They're a team. They're not just an idea. And they haven't really spent any time thinking about creating a culture or processes. They just sort of did it and then they're there. In that moment, what would you tell the leadership team of, of a company like that, trying to establish a culture and a legacy for the future?

JAMES: Yeah. Listen, I think that's a great question. And I, I think that they, you know, a lot of, a lot of time organizations, you know, companies, startups, they begin, it's a, it's a cult of personality, if you like, or it's an original originating philosophy, and the enthusiasm that comes from that. But then of course, scale kicks in and pass about 30, 50 people thereabouts. It becomes unmanageable on that level and then fiefdoms are created, and you get two, you really get two diverging courses. You get the educated, but unenthusiastic, and you get the enthusiastic and uneducated, or uninformed. Now, which one's worse? There's the loose cannons going out there, thinking they know what it's all about going in one direction and that those who become increasingly kind of skeptical perhaps... So the challenge is how do you, how do you, how do you capture the hearts of one and the heads of the other? It is rarely kind of about creating an ongoing conversation. But the, the most important conversations within the sports team tend to be in the preseason. Tend to be before things go, because it's, what do we want to become? What do we want to achieve together? If that's what we want to achieve, who do we have to be?

What are our kind of operating principles? And if we're going to be that, how are we going to behave? What are the standards and expectations we can hold each other accountable for? And I think the principles are no different within a business group. The process I kind of try to bring, there's a kind of a virtuous circle, if you like. First is a strategic idea of where we're at and where we want to go, and that's really a leadership top table conversation, “We're here. We want to be there, we’re two product focused. We want to be more customer focused. I don't know. Whatever that shift needs to be. And then that needs to be really socialized, I guess, and talked about and an open conversation with your next tier leadership. And then it gets opened up to a wider tribe, you know, their tribes, if you like, their teams.

And that conversation is really important for two reasons. One you'll find out stuff you never knew, but most important it's the conversation changes things, you know, an appreciative inquiry, and I've spoken about it a bit today, but there's a huge amount of strength in it as a genuine agent of change. The questions you ask are kind of the answer if that makes sense. In asking the questions change takes place, takes place because people get their fingerprints on it, it takes place because it feels authentic. It takes place because you recognize voice. You allow people to play a part.

And of course, Wayne Smith, the former coach of the All Blacks has a great line where he says people rise to a challenge if it's their challenge. You know, and so creating a space in which people can make it their own, bring their own personal purpose to your purpose, to your cause. Very important.

Then it becomes about standards and expectations. If that's what we want to become, who do we have to be? How are we going to behave? And then we get to that kind of cultural manifestation. What's the language around that? You know, if you're not 15 minutes early, you're late. You know, as a classic kind of example, in a sporting, the kind of the Lombardi time. The symbols that you start to create, the rituals that you reveal, the way you enforce, or endorse and enforce, you know, what do you reward and what won't you take? What won't you put up with? The way you measure and monitor becomes hugely important. Is that tight, you know, micromanagement, or are there other measures that you use? How do you align yourself around reward and recognition? How do you induct? How do you select? How do you induct?

And if, if that circle goes all the way around that induction is sort of telling that story again and becomes about the storytelling. So, so really what I try to do, and every organization is on a different part of that pathway. In terms of the way they've sort of inculturated themselves. So, so it becomes a very useful model to kind of look at where you're at, almost on both on an organizational level and a, and on a team level and, you know.

With reference to your work Stan and that Team of Teams concept. You know, I've been looking at, not too closely, but you know, there are drug gangs… in Spain that have fundamentally cellular networks. There is the gay ballroom scene, the kind of house scene, happening in clubs in New York and Paris and London, that it evolves as a sort of diverse cellular network of kind of individual belonging.

In this sort of mediatized, social media times, device led, atomized kind of world ,that those small pockets of meaning become extraordinarily powerful and important. And I think one of the key ways to influence an entire organization is start to work on a team level. Start to model excellence team by team. And we're an amazingly mimetic species. We copy each other. If we see something that works, we grab it and we go for it. And so I think, I think there are a lot of models on sort of organizational change that have really been kind of hierarchical and monolithic. We're going to change the whole organization and you know, you can, you want to have that intention, but you know, it's difficult to change yourself, let alone, let alone 300,000 people spread out across 200 geographies, you know? But if you can start to model on a kind of

almost team by team basis, the, you know, I hesitate to say this, but you know, given, given the pandemic, but you know, culture is kind of a virus.

It, it, it spreads by, by, by, you know, being a contagious virus in a sense. And, and if it's good. And if it's not good, then the path then the immunity gets built up and it will be redacted. So, you know, implanting great principles on a small team basis and modeling them and rewarding them and recognizing them, I think is a, a very powerful way to start to enact real change within larger organizations.

Slightly roundabout answer.

STAN: James. That's brilliant. Chris and I teach at Yale University in leadership. And we'd been working with a football team for about a decade. And one of the rituals they've developed is every summer, we take the rising seniors, next year seniors, where the battle was fought, and we spent some time on the battlefield, but they do a dinner.

And we, I say some words, the coach who's brilliant, Tony Reno, who has been on this show, says some words, but then we leave. And this group of about 25 rising seniors then spends probably four to five hours typically to one or two in the morning, making a compact between each other of how they're going to conduct themselves for the next season.

JAMES: Brilliant.

STAN: Yeah, it's powerful.

JAMES: It's, it's the it's that those lateral connections and expectations that are so powerful and it begins by, you know, we talked about the coach CEO, the idea of a coach CEO, the idea of being a facilitator, being the resource to create a conversation in which other people can bring themselves to it. And that the expertise is in the room is in the team. And, and if you can create that, what you do is you create those lateral connections and those lateral connections are the powerful… if, if everyone's just worried about getting into trouble from, from somebody upstairs, you don't really have a team. What you have is a whole lot of individual relationships with somebody upstairs, but if you can become a facilitator and create those connections and therefore those standards, and then the expectations of each other, it becomes a self-regulating ethos if done right.

Because, you know, take the military thing, you know, no one, you know, the military don't really fight for, for the flag, you know, you might, but really it's about the guy in the foxhole beside you, right. It's about creating those connections and, and we're in this together and we're going to do this thing, and the purpose might be defending liberty et cetera, et cetera, but really it's, you know, you don't want to let your mates down. That's the Spartan shield idea. You know, my, my sword is for the enemy and my shield is for my brother. And to create, you know, smart leaders on that team-by-team basis can create, if you can create those lateral standards and expectations and the openness, and the psychological safety, that environment of deep human connection, those teams will… that's your legacy, you know, that's your legacy. That's what

lasts. And that's an unstoppable force in a world that has pulled apart by self-interest and distrust and doubt. You know, cohesion is the thing that wins, that wins in any human activity.

CHRIS: James, I don't think we can finish on a stronger point than that one. Really just, a powerful discussion. And there's so many important lessons, you know, having the good fortune of growing up in, in sports, service, you know, in, in the SEAL teams. And now lots of times dealing with corporate executives, you can see the connection between all these different spaces. And I don't know of anyone that's captured it better than you have in your, in your work.

So, Stan and I both really, really appreciate the time and insights.

JAMES: Listen, it's been a, you know, it's a cliche to say an honor and a privilege, but it's genuinely been an honor and a privilege, and I've really enjoyed the conversation. And my, my grandmother had, left me and my grandmother's legacy to me was a motto and she just said, "Be useful."

And I found it a really useful motto. I just hope I've been useful to somebody listening or to you guys and made a small ripple in the pond and sent it out with, so thank you very much for having me. I really appreciate it.

STAN: Thanks so much, James.

CHRIS: Great discussion. We really appreciate it.

Just a great discussion with, with James there. You and I both had read his book years ago, his, *Legacy*, which I highly recommend to anybody, if you listen to this show, you will like that book. Trust me. Because he is capturing the essence of what it takes to create a culture-oriented team that it also happens to be, you know, one of the best teams in the history of sports. Right. In a way that I just haven't seen others, others do. And there's a lot of writing out, out there about that, that topic.

One of the key points that he brings up in his discussion and, and in, in his writing is the narrative, the story that sits behind a great team. And we both seen that in the, in military units, in certain corporate spaces and that absolutely in athletics, that's all things that James talks about. That's the one that's sort of top of the list jumps out at me.

STAN: Yeah, in a conversation, he and I had before the podcast, he revealed that he'd started in advertising. And, you know, we sometimes think of advertising and Mad Men and we say, well, that's not genuine. You're creating a slogan or an idea that may almost be deceptive enough to get people to use a product. And yet narrative is not necessarily deceptive. Narrative can be absolutely honest. It can say this is what we want to be, and this is what we will commit ourselves to be.

And when I think of the All Blacks, whether it's sweeping the shed or any of the other 15 leadership lessons he derived from spending time with them, they're all about people setting a standard for themselves and an expectation that they'll live up to that narrative.

CHRISS: Yeah. And it's, I think one of the lessons that, that leaders in the, in the corporate space can pull away from that. And we could think of great examples of folks we've worked with that, that do this well, or want to learn how to do it well, but I don't think enough leaders outside of the military and sports think about themselves in that so that sort of coaching narrative lens, the idea of, and I loved when he said you don't create ritual, you uncover it. And so looking at your organization through that lens and saying, "What is it that makes us special and how do I find that, that teachable moment?" tease it out when he said, you know, there's, there's some good leaders see something, there's something there, I want to unpack that and talk about it more because it's going to unpack a ritual that, that makes us special and different.
And I think what I liked about his framing there, was that it made it approachable. Anybody can do that. There's a ritual inside a, you know, a T-ball team and you just, you have to find it, talk about it, and get people on board with being part of it.

STAN: I urge everybody to read it and we did not just as your team apply it to your team, but apply it to yourself, because you are not just a member of the All Blacks, you have decided to be an All Black. And if you go through the 15 leadership lessons, there's responsibility, adaptability, things which we sort of automatically think. And then I think it's number five or six, and it's a, it's a word, uh, Whanau. And it basically means no dickheads and it's a little offensive, but when we think if I'm a jerk, I'm really not living up to All Blacks. I can't be 14 of the 15 qualities and be a jerk and, and be living up to what I say it is to be an All Black.

CHRIS: Yeah, and if listeners that aren't familiar with it, it's absolutely worth a Google of the All Blacks. And one of the first things will come up is the haka. We didn't talk about it with James, cause I'm sure he talks about that all the time, but it's sort of a, it's a ritual they do at the beginning of their games, which is, is worth some further research for those that are, that are curious about that sort of thing.

And there was another point we didn't have time to get to today, but I'd love your thoughts on it, which is, and some of this comes up in this discussion around legacy and how they had started to look at themselves. And, you know, you don't have to spend our lives on high-performance teams. How, how do you look at the classic question of the, the absolute high performer who doesn't have the Whanau?

Like how much, how much can you tolerate from that? A++ complete one-off, you know, warrior or brilliant, uh, investor or whatever space you happen to be in, when it comes to the damage they might be doing to the team or culture?

STAN: You know, we always have a theoretical response. And then when we are coaching a team or leading a team, our best sales person, our best baseball pitcher, whatever is the person who's violating the rules. I've come to the conclusion you can't put up with very much. The corrosive effect of that person who is either disloyal or dishonest or whatever it is that violates

what we say, creates that say-do gap. And that is a case between the difference between what we say our values are and what people are actually doing.

And when we tolerate that gap as leaders, even if it's not our behavior, if we tolerate it amongst one of our people, the new standard is the lower standard. And you just have to understand that. And so, the most difficult decisions I, I had to make in commands, as you'll remember, were those good people who got a DUI when they, when we were in the Rangers and they had to be thrown out or, or whatever, or someone who had violated, something that was sacred to us.

CHRIS: Yeah. We'll oftentimes, with our, our students at Yale pose, sort of leadership question of this same sort of thing. Are you your number one salesperson, your number one trader, and they've done XYZ and you know, they're not going to get thrown in jail, but they've crossed their they're being they're damaging the culture that you're trying to build.

What do you do? And it always leads to a good conversation because they needed academic responses. Well, we're going to fire them, et cetera, but then you walk through, okay. The consequences, you're also going to have to let it go through other people because your numbers aren't going to make it for the quarter or whatever.

And so, it gets a little harder, but the ultimate takeaway there where we try to walk students is, it's actually already too late. You've already, you missed your opportunity… cause you've known this for a while, right? And you were willing to tolerate XYZ. This person was pushing and probing, and now they've got leverage because they know their jobs depending on their performance, they know, you know, the outcomes.

And so to your point, it matters the first time you see it, it matters the comment in the hallway. It matters all of those little details that it's so easy to ignore as a leader. And I know I'm guilty of it all the time. Right? Cause you have to be so on tune. But when it comes to that pinnacle moment, you've already kind of failed in your role as a leader of an organization.

STAN: But, but I remember Chris, when we were in combat in Iraq, and you were first a SEAL leader and then a SEAL on the staff, even at that point, you were constantly talking about the standard. We have to maintain in terms of our conduct on the battlefield, vis-a-vis the enemy. There was a certain desire or pull to go to the dark side, to fight as dirty as Al-Qaeda did, because the things they were doing were unconscionable. The problem is if we do them that become unconscionable. And I remember you talking about the need to maintain that standard within the SEALs. And of course, we've seen some challenges with it. The case of Eddie Gallagher and, and others, have raised the issue of the very charismatic, aggressive warrior if it's in tension with the discipline military person that we absolutely need. And of course, there's been a lot of talking that has caused a lot of us anguish.

CHRIS: Yeah. And the, you know, those, those real-life situations, make it so much harder and there's all, I think one of the problems we face as a country and there probably are examples of in previous periods of conflict, but this one is so real.

So real time, the feedback loops are so… and it's been Hollywoodized, you know, there's movies about operations while the unit that did it still on deployment practically. I mean, it's just crazy the feedback loop and those versions are never quite right. Right. And they, they want to present the warrior poet who makes the right decision every time.

And, and so I would watch that and say, well, of course we should have… don't tell that person what to do. They're the ones there that understand it, but it's not always like that. There's, those problems are way more complex, and you have to have those rules set and boundaries in many ways to protect that individual from the responsibility of having to choose between three horrible things.

You have to have structure that allows them to frame their, their decision-making. But it's yeah, it's, it's, it's incredibly complex, and, and great teams, great teams do that, back to the point of the discussion with, with James. Part of that narrative, in those principles is giving a framework in which people can decide how they're going to act and knowing if I act outside of those boundaries, I'm no longer part of this, this tribe, so I have to be conscious of that.

STAN: Yeah, and reinforcing it constantly. Leaders have to reinforce it and it it's often painful or inconvenient, or even frightening to reinforce some of the standards that you know are important. But as you say, when you allow or condone things that undermine your narrative and your standards, that's a slippery slope.

CHRIS: Well, a great discussion with a very, very thoughtful person on that topic. So, we appreciate James taking the time and look forward to having you all here next time on *No*