NORMAN: So this is our, this is our moment. This is our doorway into... let's get these issues out on the table. Let's just be real about them. It's going to feel uncomfortable. That's okay. But once we all get to a common understanding of this moment, this starting place, then we can work on solutions in a, in a, in a very real and hopefully an impactful way.

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: The UnitedHealth Group headquarters are stationed near Minneapolis, Minnesota. In early summer 2020, after George Floyd's murder, the city took on a new significance: as protests erupted across the city, and the nation at large. You could see the smoke rising from the protests from some UnitedHealth Group windows.

Norman Wright, Executive Vice President and Chief Customer Experience Officer at UnitedHealth Group, saw firsthand how this moment in history was affecting their customers, partners, and citizens worldwide. When invited by then-CEO Dave Wichmann to speak to his experiences as an African American leader in the moment, Norman accepted, speaking to their organization of over 300,000 people.

Norman, a long time friend of McChrystal Group, brings a calm, analytical mind, and 34 years of experience to the conversation with Stan and Chris. Beyond speaking to the protests following George Floyd's murder, he shares what it was like to fight against the war that is COVID-19, and how he thinks about balancing the risk of healthcare transformation when change is needed. It's a timely, thought-provoking discussion we know you all will enjoy.

Thanks to Norman and his team for taking the time. Now, over to Stan.

STAN: Norman. Thanks so much for being on today. And Chris and I have been particularly excited to have our old friend on, but also to have somebody who's had a unique vantage point. For the last year and a half, at least, you know, 9/11, Chris and I were both already in the service and we suddenly found ourselves at war for the next years.

And then about a year and a half ago, you found yourself at war: a war against COVID-19.

NORMAN: I did.

STAN: What did it feel like to lead a healthcare organization in what was in the equivalent of a World War?

NORMAN: Yeah. And I appreciate the question in that framing, but, it has felt like a world war. The entire world's been engaged in this, very, very insidious difficult, challenging foe. But Stan, before I just share a couple of reflections there, I just want to say thank you for inviting me and having me. And it's wonderful to see you. Wonderful to see Chris.

I have a really… it's one of my favorite partnerships, now that I've had in the course of my career, and the work we've done together has been very important to the United Health Group overall, from a, a leadership methodology, how you drive teams across a very complex organization and, how you manage in times of like fast moving incredible chap.

So it's, it's been great. We've learned a lot, consider you both great, great colleagues and great friends.

STAN: You're kind.

NORMAN: So, you know, so you mentioned 9/11. I was, I was reflecting a little bit, you know, 9/11 was like something we had never seen of course and tragic, in so many ways. I think about other crises. I think about the financial crisis of '07 and '08. I think you both know that I spent so many years in financial services. That was very, very difficult. Many market corrections, other global social economic events, all tough, all had their own dynamics.

This pandemic, and then on top of it, George Floyd's murder, all of the social unrest that followed, created just this incredibly challenging environment, where we're having to continue to serve our customers, members, patients, the provider community, our clients, serve our communities and continue to drive the right level of outcome with so many changing conditions happening and almost real time. So, it's been very, very challenging for sure.

When I, when I think about it, how we had to show up in every moment, being present, tuned in, listening, compassionate, making sure that we were incredibly urgent in everything we're doing and being responsive, super, super critical because you know, our customers needed us, right? Like never before. So that certainly was challenging from a leadership perspective.

A few things that I would share in terms of… kind of what I think worked well. And I always start with culture and values. You know, our values are integrity, compassion, relationships, innovation, and performance. They're much more than words on a page, as you know, for our company, you know in working with us.

And it was great to see the entire organization leaning into those values day to day, as we navigated through. And again, focused on serving. I'll forever remember how urgent we were in first thinking about our people, and needing to get them to work at home, safely, quickly, by the way, that'll happen within about two weeks. 150,000 people had to get to a home-based environment.

And then you say, well, Norman, what about the rest? I can help you pass it over 300,000 people. Well, we have, as you both know, a very large ambulatory care system. We have clinicians, nurses, we have docs, we've got urgent care centers, we've got clinics all over and all of those individuals had to keep on serving and, and to show up every day.

So, the urgent focus on, not only moving the people to home who weren't direct patient-facing, but then the rest of our rest of our team, making sure they were safe, the appropriate PPE, the right safety protocols, all of those elements, so they can continue to serve the public. So that was, just being super urgent and, making sure we have the right focus on our folks was critical.

This is something that I know you all, you talk about a lot in your, your experience in the military. It was, it was great to see the, the agile, almost scrappy, "solve problems in the moment" kind of environment come to life. Right. So, we'd like to think we're pretty fast moving. And we like to think we're pretty progressive in how we think about, you know, the business and solving problems and launching new products and services.

Boy, this was, this was, you know, on steroids to the nth degree, how fast we moved. You know, the health and human services organization came to us and said, "we need to get billions out to providers to make sure they're stable. Can you help us?" Within literally a matter of days, that process was built and sort of off and running.

We noticed very early in the pandemic that there was huge disparity in the impact of infection happening in the African American, Hispanic, communities and Native American communities. We were out in communities within a matter of just a couple of weeks, engaging directly and testing kits and education and safety kits, et cetera.

There's just two examples of where I saw the organization just mobilize, get going, and not worry about all the sort of large, what can feel like bureaucratic process. So, setting the tone from a leadership perspective, that that's what we expect. That's okay. As long as you've got the customer and central focus and you're working on solutions, move fast.

And now of course, the challenge is how do we, how do we maintain that? How do we not go backwards in that? So that's another one I thought was amazing.
I'm gonna just… two more to share there. Being really tied into our communities. So, we, you know, ongoing prior to the pandemic, we've got strong relationships across all of our businesses with the communities we serve.

And you have a number of executives that sit on boards. You have a lot of folks that volunteer, so we've got good connections. During the pandemic, the engagement with our community partners also went up exponentially because they are so tightly tuned in in what's happening to the citizens around those various communities and feeding that information back to us so we can help support, provide resourcing, provide solutions to make sure that communities were getting exactly what they needed.

So, that, that focus on being externally tuned-in, dialed-in also super important. So, so those are the things I, I think about. You know, pandemic of courses isn't over, they're all watching the Delta variant, very closely. So, these leadership lessons and sort of how we've evolved, um, we're pushing every day to keep operating with that mind, that mindset.

CHRIS: Norman, can I get you to unpack, along maybe two different vectors, somewhat what you just laid out, which was, which has really, it's been great to watch and observe knowing your organization from, from the outside, what you all have done in the last year and a half. But this… there's been a series of necessary transformations that you've been at center up along with the other, other leaders there, but this idea of transformation I'd love for you to just give your perspective as a senior, right.

And what that really feels like, because anytime you go, you know, there's a natural evolution, but then there's also a transformation, which I try to separate. When you're transforming something as a leader, you are, you are pulling some of the underpinnings that people are comfortable with out from underneath, right? You're reshuffling the way you do business. Some of that has been forced over the last year because of the, all the things you just laid out. But some you'll want to sustain, I'm assuming, as you go, cause you probably found some great ways of doing things that you want to hold onto when the crisis has passed.

So, can you just explore that a little bit? What that feels like as a leader to face those moments of transformation?

NORMAN: Chris and so that's a great question. And you know, you kind of said prior to pandemic, we were already thinking about and going through levels of transformation. I just want to like paint a couple minutes of context for our audience and then I'll I talk about how we, how we met transformation, how that's different than maybe incrementalism and evolving.

So, you know, our mission remains, right? It's the help people live healthier lives and help make the healthcare system work better, better for everyone. When you really think about that, that's a very aspirational vision. This is a very big, big and complex system, the healthcare system of the United States.

You have, uh, lots of folks who are struggling to understand it, to navigate it, to pay for care access and health equity issues. You have an outdated healthcare system from a technology and process perspective. So, a lot of important factors that we're dealing with there that even prior to pandemic, we're looking at those factors and looking at our mission and saying, "We're really going to get there. We got to really dramatically transform the way we've been operating."

And I love what you touched on when you said you'd mess in with some of the underlying sort of foundational underpinnings, because when you look at our look at our company, it's, you know, and I say this in all humility, it's been very successful. I joined the company in 2013, as an example, Optum was a $37 billion business. We're just shy of four times that size, now, eight years later. So, when you, you think about that and you think about the way we've gone about growing the business organically, yeah, you have a lot of people who would think we're doing okay. We're all right. Right.

But when you think about what's happening in competitively now, when you, when we look in the mirror at what's really happening with healthcare trend at the highest level, it's not moving

down anywhere near at the rate, any of us would want. Healthcare as a percent of GDP in the United States, it's still twice that of other leading developed nations.

We still have those issues of access and health equity that are referenced. So, the system, isn't getting fixed as fast as we all needed to and want it to… as the public deserves. So those things in our mind call for transformation.

I think it's a both/and. I think you have to every day, come in and continuously improve and get better. The old Deming philosophy around quality still applies. You need to empower teams seems to be thinking about how do I make my part of the process more efficient, more effective, more customer friendly every single day - that's important. But to get breakthrough transformation, you also need to be thinking about where's the world evolving to? What are the macro trends that we need to respond to, example consumerism, hasn't been a big driver in healthcare, but guess what? It is becoming one very, very quickly.

And members and patients, their expectations around how they should be served are very much being set by the experience they have with Amazon and other retailers. And if financial services company, the travel airline that they booked through digitally. So, all of those things are driving consumers to be more demanding, wanting to be more in control of their healthcare experience.

And guess what? Everybody still feels it's all way too expensive, too. So important that we're getting at really big game-changing shifts and how the model has been built over time, how it operates. And a lot of this is about modernization, using more modern technology, really getting at the power of consumer digital, using the power of data, analytics and insights to power interactions.

And it's a power providers that, you know, at the time they're sitting with patients in their office, making sure they've got the right decision support, tools and information, you know, really making all of those things come together to power it just more modern, more connected, more personal experience.

And ultimately one that should be less expensive and deliver better health, quality outcomes. So, you know, say all that to say, we really have to do both. You've got to get the organization. So it gets a little bit healthier every day and improves and how it operates a little every day and leaders have to feel incredibly accountable to doing that.

But then you also need every leader thinking about, I have to play a role in transforming fundamental elements of healthcare. And how do I rethink and reshape the way things get done? And, uh, Hey, I wouldn't, I wouldn't say we have the exact answer there and it's a, it's worked imperfectly, but it's gratifying to see when I talk about that growth of the company, you know, ambulatory care is very much on the road to being fully transformed. The way we think about pharmacy care services, very different from the old days of just issuing and getting a script out the door. The power of, again, information flowing to physicians to make the best health pathways decisions, and clinical decision support. All those things are pretty, pretty dramatically improved from where they were a few years ago.

STAN: Norman. That's great. I'm going to pull on transformation just a little bit more because I think it's important to our listeners because sometimes we say the word transformation and people think, oh yeah, we'll do that.

But it's pretty risky. I've just spent the last year and a half writing a book on risk. And now I carry a umbrella, even on sunny days. And I'm paranoid about everything because the world is risky. And when Chris and I were in the counterterrorist force, we had this tension: on the one hand we knew we needed to change, to transform. On the other hand, we had a certain group of people saying it's too risky to change because we're in the middle of a fight. Let's wait until the fights over. Can you talk about how you thought about balancing that risk and the healthcare in a moment when transformation was obviously needed?

NORMAN: Yeah. Well, there's a, there's a real burning platform here and we touched on a few elements of it. You, you all at JSOC had your burning platform of fighting and conducting the war. Our burning platform is, again, members, patients, in need, cost of the system too much. And guess what competitors are now firmly aiming at this industry. They understand the, you know, that it's been slow to transform. They don't have the baggage of the legacy debt around technology and other elements. So competitive environment is rapidly changing and evolving. If we don't change quickly, change is going to be forced upon us and it could be too late.

So those are, Stan, sort of things I think about there. I know a couple of things we learned from you guys, frankly. You gotta have a clear plan, so yes, people will feel transformation is risky, especially vis a bbis, I have an operating plan. It's very clear. I know what my performance metrics are and expectations.

I've got to hit certain markers over the next weeks, months, quarters, and big transformative things you're talking about could be disruptive to me. Well, if you plan in the appropriate way, and in a disciplined way, you know, you can have parallel paths that we have to keep executing, but we also have to invest and stage in these transformative elements. So having a clear plan, communicating that plan, and making sure everyone understands their place in it is I think one way you, you manage and mitigate risks.

Second is, you know, communicating that plan, making sure people feel shared ownership for it. You got shared consciousness of understanding, and then we've got everybody tied into the same outcome in terms of a goal. That's another way you de-risk and manage to the people that may feel, I'm going down on my own path. I'm going to do what I've always done, versus, no I understand kind of the larger mission, my role in it, I'm accountable for it. I'll, uh, I'll contribute in the best way I can. So, I think that's important.

Another significant risk is you charged down a path without really being tuned into the marketplace, your clients, your customers, and frankly, your prospective customers. So really being very focused on having that intel. And I mean, down to a nuanced level of where the needs are going, kind of what capabilities you're going to have to have, and making sure you stay kind of super, super relevant is super important as you're going through transformation. If you go off

into a black box, come up with a great plan and off you go trying to drive it two years later, you can come out of that box.

And what you thought was important and relevant could have changed dramatically. Right? So being tuned in along the way, and always operating from that base of intel and understanding, I think is another way you, you manage that risk.

And then last thing, Stan, I would say no turning back. You often will find, and I think it's a little human nature. I don't really hold it against people. I coach to it all the time. And I don't think it's often human nature to say, "Here comes another big change initiative. Here comes a, another smart person who's pitching a new methodology to get something done. Yet, I know that we've done things this way and it's worked well for us."

And it's important from a leadership perspective to make it super clear: we're not turning back. Right. We, we, the burning platform is real. The competitive threat in our situation is real. Members and patients really need us. We have to be better. So, there is a, there's a different way. There's a next generation, we're going to work our way towards it. Get on board and stay on it. So, no turning back.

CHRIS: Perfect. That's a great way to put it. I'm obviously a fan. I'd like to tease down into that a little bit on a, sort of a tactical process question, because I watched you, closely, very aggressively evolve into your, your communication model.

You're a natural communicator. But you were willing to do that with greater speed and transparency and a level of inclusion that might've been out of norm with any big traditional organization. I can't remember the exact numbers off the top of my head, but you were comfortable putting in place communication forums on an aggressive, you know, cadence throughout any given month that pulled hundreds of people into conversation.

And some of what you were just saying around your ability to communicate that transformation plan, how you were going to, why, how you were going to look at it, measure it, and then to get real-time feedback from folks that were closer to the problems to the market., to your end users, that's a risky move for a lot of leaders. It's an uncomfortable space because you're so exposed to information might not know, how to respond to you yet, et cetera. Can you talk a little bit about how, how you felt going through that and what you got from it?

NORMAN: One of my favorite experiences along the journey, frankly, I've been, you know, up to this, or at this, for 35 years in corporate America. And you know, when your team challenged us with what, by the way, we, we ultimately called that process Status One, and I forget exactly what you called it at JSOC, but same thing. You've got thousands of people on a bridge and video, and you went through that process. We call it our Status One and as transparent as I'd like to think I am as a leader, to be communicating openly in a two-way, sort of two-way dynamic in a very transparent way around what's happening in the business, where we're having success, where we're having issues, and gaps, and problems, and then have all the leaders from, you

know, at that time it was a very large group, right, Chris, it was 55,000 people we were responsible for at that time.

Having them communicate openly around, "Hey boss, you know, I know you think this is going well, it's not. Here, and here is where it's misfiring and here's what we need to change to, to make it operate more effectively." We are, we're under invested in an area that, you know, the leadership is saying is super important. We need to therefore adjust our approach. Having leaders feeling comfortable enough, challenging me, myself and other senior leaders openly in that kind of dialogue, to take an idea to make it better, right is something that's… So those things, even for me, felt a little uncomfortable in the beginning, but boy, when we talk about, and again, I hate to overuse the terms, but in my, in my experience, they're so real: building common purpose, building a shared consciousness, establishing trust. People starting to believe. I just challenged Norman in that forum on something really important. Not only did I not get blown up, he's actually, you know, touting the fact that I did that, using it as an example of the kind of leadership we want to see around the place. Really, really powerful, really powerful.

So, yeah, from an outcome perspective, I saw our decision-making get better. I saw our speed too, sort of getting to solutions increased. I saw the engagement of the team and the leaders feeling just, just more empowered, really takes some significant steps forward. And, we were stronger from an execution perspective, you know, our, our outcomes and our results, they were fairly strong coming in. They got even stronger.

So that process, it's still one of the best ones I've ever gone through. It's when always coach and guide leaders to dive into and to trust it.

STAN: Norman, I'm going to ask you to talk a little bit to very young leaders now. You know, they're, they're doing the right things, they've got a mission, they've given people the context, the shared consciousness, but it's a little scary and they push hard and it's working with most people, but there's always that very small percentage in the organization who just are natural naysayers. They… something from birth. How do you handle them? What do you do?

NORMAN: Listen, I'm a firm believer, um, and Stan, over, you know, three decades of this, that everyone deserves a couple of chances to sort of get it, change their behavior, et on board. And, you know, if you approach them with the right level of, "Let's find the common ground, let's talk about how your values, your interests are aligned with the company's and what we're trying to get accomplished."

And frankly, to your point, down to a mission level of what we're trying to get done in this particular case. Often, when you approach it that way, you'll, you'll get a good percentage of conversion. You'll get people to sort of like, "Okay, I get it. And I'm on board," and, and, uh, you know, and help them understand how you're personally accountable for staying on board and staying… but if those things don't work, you gotta move on. Right.

You, it, it's, it's super important that when you think about the team and you know, the old saying, right, you're as strong as your weakest link. If you have leaders at any level who aren't

rowing the boat with you in the same direction and who aren't supporting the mission, the values, what's your like, sort of, aims and your targets are, you really do have to get them off your team because it's, it's not only a drag, it's actually destructive.

So, the hard decisions, sometimes they are players and leaders that have a tremendous amount of content knowledge. They may have been at the company for 20 years and no one's addressed the issue. They may have external relationships that seem like they're super important and all of those things, yeah. They may create some level of risk.

I believe the risk is greater though, when you leave them on the team and then the environment. So, you know, some leadership, courage, and having the moxie to say, if I can't get you to convert, we've got to move on.

CHRIS: I'm gonna pivot us back to a comment you made earlier, you brought up the, the George Floyd murder in the, in the middle of what was already incredibly chaotic period for the country and for you as a leader and for your organization. You know, you and I have been friends for a few years now.

And so, I was able to hear about the discussion you did with your CEO, Dave Wichmann, who was running, I think weekly town halls to just keep the organization up and what was going on. And you had the willingness as a leader to go into that forum and have an honest conversation about what that situation meant to you, how you thought about it, and how you felt about it, as a, as a leader or as just an individual in society. That's a situation where many leaders, especially at your seniority, could have come up with a laundry list of reasons why that wasn't worth the risk. I can't get out in that public of a forum and be honest and transparent and even vulnerable about how you viewed that situation.

You chose to take the hard route there. And I found it incredibly powerful. It's an exceptional example of leadership. Can you walk us through that decision, that moment and why you felt willing to enter that space?

NORMAN: Yeah, Chris, thanks for bringing up that moment in time. And it was… it was a really important one. Probably one of the bigger, bigger moments in my life and career journey. And one I'll never forget. I have to start by just acknowledging Dave Wichmann's courage, and being willing to open up that conversation and that dialogue in that way in front of an organization of over 300,000 people, but also recognizing anything we say can go external pretty quickly, right?

Yeah. When you think about where we were, you know, in society at that time, and academic Laden, such a tragic, terrible murder happening in front of all of our eyes, right. By the way and I say this to a lot of people, folks have asked me, they've been a lot of other, you know, murders and people have been in police custody and why this one was so different.

So many of us were at home. So many of us were a captive audience in that moment to something that was terrible and horrible. And, and you're unable… once you heard about it and

saw it, you were unable to walk away from it in any way emotionally. So, share those things to say the conditions were in my mind perfect for a very real conversation. And, you know, Stan and Chris, I, I actually, I walked into the conversation, actually not exactly sure what I was going to say. I was asked to just comment on, how I was feeling and what the situation kind of the effect it was having on me.

And, you know, as I talked about being a, you know, an African American Black man in this country, and the fact that that could have been my son, one of my friends or me, you know, I was thinking in the moment at the time, it's important that we all get, we all get really comfortable with this uncomfortable conversation that we all, now for the first time, just acknowledge that these dynamics in society had been going on for a long time. And, it's time to say, "enough."

And part of the change has to be all of us weighing in and whatever way we can to say, "we can't think that way, we can't behave that way." And by the way, I can't just stand on the sidelines. That was one sort of thought streaming. The other one was, and I'll never forget this. the Friday prior, remember now we, we are, we are headquartered in Minneapolis where this George Floyd murder happened. The social unrest we all saw on television. The smoke rooms were easily within sight from our campus. I walked into one of my colleagues' offices. He has just finished up a Zoom WebEx call with a customer and given where his screen was positioned in the background, you could see the smoke rising.

And he shared very openly, transparently, just got off a call with a customer and almost none of that conversation is about the deal or the solution we were working on. It was all about, oh my gosh, what's happening in society and what are we doing about it? So, so when I, you know, I thought about that and customers are thinking about it, talking about it, being affected by it, all the communities and the members and the folks we serve dramatically affected by it.

There is no way we, any of us can be as effective as you want to be or hit our full potential if we're not thinking through a more diverse and inclusive lens. We still haven't addressed health equity, in as significant way as we want to in this country. So, this is our, this is our home. This is our doorway into… let's get these issues out on the table. Let's just be real about them. It's going to feel uncomfortable. That's okay. But once we all get to a common understanding of this moment, this starting place, then we can work on solutions in a very real and hopefully an impactful way.

And from that moment, Chris and Stan, and this is where I'm just, I've got so much hope and I'm so proud that the, the investment, the energy, the resources now going into Equity, big E, health Equity, subcomponent, social justice programs, more engagement in the community, more investment in young people of color, across multiple ethnic segments. Like all of those things have been significantly dialed up, not just by us, our company, which I'm super proud of, but by a lot of companies now, not only in our country, but around the world.

So, you know, one way of answering your question, but, I'm super grateful and humble that that conversation just was a bit of a spark and it was a bit of a, you know, it made it okay for us to get

into this conversation in a more real way. And I think that's leading to some, some progress and hopefully breakthrough.

CHRIS: Yeah. Just a quick comment. I think it's… it was exceptional and I'm glad you walked us through it. I appreciate that. I appreciate you framing your, your mindset around, you know, thinking about your own children and family. I love the saying that, you know, you can, you can take the, the easy wrong, or the hard right. And I don't know most of us, aren't going to have that many hard rights really in our careers. And that it's just such a good example. And I always want to think of those right. You know, the few times I've been on those situations, how would I, you know, want to explain the way I navigate this to my 30-year-old children down the road, and will they, will they judge you as, wow, you really did take the hard right. Or, you know, maybe that maybe you should've done that differently. And it's an, it's an amazing example of taking the hard right.

NORMAN: Right, right. I love that, Chris, in terms of reflecting on, you know, what will you be proud of what you did and how you reacted in the moment. Sort of down the road. Stan one other thing you made me think about when you say, "Hey, Norman, address the young leaders that may be listening," this is really true in that moment, but it's true for me in a lot of tough leadership business moments. I kind of all, I often walk in and say, "what's the worst thing that can happen?" So if I take a somewhat productive, provocative angle, and if I say something that's incredibly real and authentic, I know there's some risks that I may offend someone, like, what's the worst thing that's going to happen? Okay. I may get beaten up. I may even get fired. You know, feel good that I've got good education and good track record and good experiences and I'll land somewhere. But I can, I can walk away and look in the mirror and say, I did the right thing. Right. And I did it for the right reasons. Be it either serving the public, serving customers, trying to be true to my organization's values and mission. I try to do the right thing. Now, I gave an extreme example of they get fired in cases you will not. In most cases, you won't. You may just feel a little uncomfortable, but be courageous. Take the step. Say what needs to be said in a thoughtful and constructive way. And often it can lead to, it can lead to breakthroughs.

STAN: That's incredible. That is literally the question I was going to answer. So, we've, we've got this connection going. What I'm going to do really is, end this by thanking you, but also with one final question, you're very centered as a person. But you've been around quite a while now.

You've been through a number of things. You've seen things. So, you've had a chance to, to triangulate experiences and decide who Norman Wright is and what your values are. And what's most important to you. Yes. How does a young leader do that? I mean, we're exposed to thought young, how do they start to, to shape and clarify their identity?

NORMAN: That's a great, that's a great question. I think it's, I think it, with all of us, it starts with, you know, kind of, what's been poured into us, through family, parents, you know, depending on how you, you've grown up in your socialization, you know, the church or whatever organizations that you've been around.

But I think those factors sort of start to give you some, some underpinnings of kind of becoming who you're going to become. And then, Stan, I think it's just, thinking about what, what matters to you? What's important to you? When you get to the end of the line, you know, back to Chris's point, around what'd you be proud? Like, what do you want people to say about you? What do you want your, your brand to be ultimately? And I don't, I mean, the, the brand that, you know, "Hey, I'm trying to get promoted and I'm trying to grow my career and I want to be, uh, you know, sort of known person," but, you know, when it's the barbecue sitting around and sitting around the fire and people are having a good old time, what, what did they say about Stan McChrystal? What did they say about Chris Fussell and Norman Wright? Like what, what do you want those themes to be? And, I think when you focus on those things, you start to get to all right, I kind of know what's important to me. I know the things I value things that are sort of going to be, I won't compromise on.

And then, and I certainly have done this and you two that a part of this for me, even at this late stage of the game, really reflect on the people that you've been exposed to, and look at various different styles of leadership. We all know you can learn from great leaders and you can learn from bad leaders. So, you know what you may not want to do with the bad leader, but you know, really kind of sit back, kind of really evaluate what you're seeing, kind of learn from the behaviors, learn from sort of the outcomes and sort of successes and failures.

And then you take those piece parts that you think are important and that can work for you. And suddenly you've got this then marriage of personal values, personal brand elements, leadership style elements that you've mingled together that you think are important and can work. Uh, and then you put your own sort of wrapping around that.

And suddenly there you have it. You've got your leadership and professional identity and frankly, you know, I've always thought, I know you two feel the same, there should be very little distance between your leadership professional identity and who you are personally, right. Should be, it should just be you. And that you is, is unique and special. And, it's hopefully a thoughtful composition of things you've learned along the way. So that's what I say, Stan.

STAN: Wow. I think that's brilliant. I just, you struck in my mind something that Frederick Douglass once said. He said, you can't just follow people are perfect because there aren't people who are perfect out there to follow. So, what you have to be able to do is take the good from people and be able to ignore those things about them that you don't want to emulate.

NORMAN: Yes.

STAN: Well, there's much to emulate in you, my friend, and let me pass it to Chris to close us out.

CHRIS: Yeah, Norman, of course, thanks for the time and just a great discussion as we knew it would be. And thanks for sharing on multiple levels. You know, one of the things I said, friends that are getting out of the service, is here's something to look forward to. There are leaders on the

outside that are just as good as General so-and-so Admiral so-and-so, you know, the people that, that you really learned from in your time in uniform.

Because that's not really known to folks in the military. They don't realize that there are leaders like that in the civilian world as well. And you're, you're an example of that in my mind. So, I'm grateful for your friendship and for the time here today.

NORMAN: Thank you, Chris. Thank you so much. Those kinds of words and Stan, the, you know, just, we'll always value our friendship and our relationship and appreciate everything you all have been doing for this country. Very, very significant. And I've had the good pleasure of being close enough to see and experience what you all bring. So, stay strong and stay safe and, and, and keep doing what you're doing. We appreciate you.

STAN: Thanks so much, Norman.

NORMAN: Take care.

CHRIS: So really appreciate Norman taking the time. He's been a friend of ours now, for years, since I work on, we just stayed in touch ever since. It was a great discussion. Not surprisingly. I think I know what you will say, but curious which part jumped out at you the most from just a seasoned leader, like Norman?

STAN: Well, of course we heard, a healthcare leader talk about COVID-19, the challenge there. We heard a, have a mature leader talk about transformation, which, United Healthcare group has gone through, but the part that obviously resonated with me was he talked about his decision to speak out on social issues, particularly, you know, the George Floyd murder, and after that, and that in my mind took a lot of courage.

CHRIS: Yeah, it did. And I think, you know, you know, I always looking for just anecdotes and case studies like this. When you, when you think of the practice of leadership and you have to, when, as you know, as we tell our students, you have to put yourself as close as you can inside the context of the moment and not just read it on the page.

Any great leadership case study throughout history. That's, that's true. And I think in that example, cause it's a phenomenal example of leadership in the moment. and courage from a leader, a willingness to step into a space. As we talked about, there was every reason not to do it, or you could have explained away why you didn't do it, but the context is also important.

I mean, Norman was there in the middle of the pandemic. Dave Wichmann, the CEO, had started running town halls, video town halls with, you know, hundreds of thousand employees across the globe that could dial in. And it was his methodology to just communicate, here's what's going on. People are uncertain about the pandemic, their jobs, the whole environment.

And then this happened, there in Minneapolis, a right in the heart of some, some major, social unrest. And he just reached out to Norman and said, you know, as a very senior African

American leader in this organization, would you come in today and just sit on the couch and we can have a discussion about this.

Without hesitation. Norman said yes. So it, this wasn't a big PR machine writing, you know, talking points. It was Norman walking in, basically out of, you know, from his own driving in, sitting down on the, on the couch with Dave and just having this discussion, which I think is a very important factor when other leaders look at moments of real, genuine, moral courage, it just jumps out.

STAN: Yeah, and I want to make sure our listeners don't take this for granted or minimize what it was. You know, we have a lot of people in the political world who are aggressively outspoken right now. And then we have people who are sort of social advocates and there are people who live on social media and they're outspoken.

But we, in the middle, have a group of people, whether they're educators or public servants or business leaders who are almost incentivized or coerced into remaining silent, to being inoffensive in everything they say to homogenize their comments and their thoughts and Dave Wichmann and particularly, Norman Wright, in this case, made the decision not to be hysterical about it to be, but to be very clear. And as you said, in the moment, it's easy to do it five years later and say, this was the import of that moment. We needed to think about it. But in the moment in a world of social media attacks, for him to take such a clear stance and to Dave support it so clearly in my mind is pretty admirable.

CHRIS: Yeah, it was. Although if you, if you got to know him, like we have been fortunate to, it's not, it's not surprising to have seen it, but it also, the moment could have easily passed and no one would have known the difference. That's another one of the key lessons that I believe in deeply is: why do you study leadership and constantly pressure test yourself? It's because the key moments will come and go before you recognize them. If you don't have a framework that you try to get to drive your actions. Cause the chaos of a moment like that, I think of everything going on in Norman's world and he gets this call, you know, it would have been easy to say, I don't, I don't have time for that. Right. But he knew, he has a leadership framework that drives his behavior. So, in moments of uncertainty, he knows what to lean on and he makes the right decision.

STAN: You know, I remember when I was a boy, there was a story and I think it was from New York City where a lady was attacked on the street by an assailant. And she was actually knifed, and there were people who saw it, who did nothing. And the attacker went away and then came back some minutes later and she was still unable to get into her apartment and he attacked her again. And it was a study of why did so many people do nothing, why they knew what needed to happen, and they did nothing. And then finally onlooker called the police. I think we all were going to go through life, and we're going to regret deeply the moments when we knew what to do. And we didn't. And Norman stands out as a leader who knew what to do and did it.

CHROS: Yeah, that's right. You know, it's a lesser-known outside of military circles, but at a similar time, and I, I was fortunate to have a discussion with them, right after Norman sat down

with, with the CEO, the current Chief Staff of the Air Force, General Brown, he was, again, it's a great example of a leader putting themselves in the fray at a precarious moment. He, I think he was up for his nomination was still in the works to become the Chief of the Air Force, four-star position, African American leader went off of that, that same time period. And he went, he did a social media discussion, basically, released a video through Air Force, social media, talking to airmen, and airwomen, you know, inside the force to say, look, a lot of people as this, as a senior African American in the Air Force, people will ask me how this makes me feel and it gave it just a two or three minute very, very honest discussion about how we saw race relations inside the force, and it was articulate and, but personal.

But again, we just, before you get confirmed, you would know far better than almost anyone, the risks that you're putting on the table and you decide to do that. And again, something that will be lost in a lot of the history books, but another really powerful moment that maybe came to mind when we were talking to Norman.

STAN: Yeah. And it does circle back around to his role during COVID-19. We are also going to have the risk of forgetting just what a big deal COVID-19 has been for the healthcare industry. I mean, it is their equivalent of a world war. And so, it's still ongoing. And those leaders had to try to get their organizations to respond to it. They had to remain profitable. They had all the normal challenges of a business, but they had to respond to something that was literally an existential threat to the population. And so, to be able to mobilize an organization, a great big behemoth organization, like they have been able to do, and get it focused and keep it motivated is a pretty, pretty heavy lift.

CHRIS: Just a broader question for you about specifics, Norman, but, but also, generalizable, the, whenever I'm working with younger folks and it's a mentor relationship, or I'm introducing them to other leaders, like here's a, here's a leader. You should stay inside our organization or outside. I will always, I will try to give them something to look for. Watch the way that this leader does X. And it might be in a meeting. It might be in a presentation. It might be the way they run their team. And I think it's a, it's a good way to hone in your leading because you're learning. Cause we're not all, you know, get through to everything.

When you look at Norman, if you were to have that young conversation, that conversation with the young leader, watch Norman Wright. And look for X. What, what comes to mind? Cause you know, quite well.

STAN: Yeah. I mean it is his calm, demeanor. You know, some leaders are visionaries. You stand on the table and make you see the far ridge line and get you excited. There are other leaders who you speak to, just bring you a sense of calm, a sense of confidence. And Norman says things that are not, hyperbolic. He says very basic, down the center of the fairway, this is the way we should operate. This is what we should do. I remember, as we were having the discussion, thinking what a powerful force you would be in the political world. I mean, he would be an absolute aberration. I mean, he'd be the albino unicorn in our current political environment, but it was so soothing and effective in my view. And so that's what I communicate with Norman.

CHRIS: Yeah, no, I couldn't agree more. And he's one of those leaders that, not ever, not all great leaders have the strength, he makes the leaders around and I've seen him do this up close and personal, he makes the leaders around him want to be better leaders. He sort of pulls people in that direction of hey, let's re remember our, our position, our responsibility to address the, the organization with a calm, calm voice here.

Great discussion, not surprisingly, always a pleasure to connect with a good friend, Norman Wright. We look forward to having you next time here on *No Turning Back*.