RUBA: And so I do believe that if you've got the opportunity and you've got the capability, then you have a responsibility to achieve your potential. And so that really pushed me to always take it as far as I could go.

So whether that's getting a PhD in graduate school, whether that's continuing to push myself and in the professional. Uh, field and in the technology industry, I just always know that it motivates me to do my best, but more importantly, it motivates me to help others achieve their potential and do their best.

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: This week, Stan and Chris speak to Ruba Borno, Senior Vice President and General Manager in Cisco's Customer Experience organization.

Stan first met Ruba when she was Chief of Staff to the CEO at Cisco, and has been impressed at how Ruba has been a "make it happen" executive throughout the years. Ruba has her PhD in Electrical Engineering and spent time at Boston Consulting Group before coming to Cisco in 2015 - where she has had been Vice President of Growth Initiatives and Vice President and General Manager of Cisco Managed Services, before serving in her current role.

Stan and Chris speak to Ruba about why empathy, emotional intelligence, and resilience are important in our leaders, why leaders should ask questions rather than give answers, and how her own experience as a refugee has influenced how she sees her career and leadership. We think you'll really enjoy the discussion. Now, over to Stan.

STAN: Ruba, let me thank you for coming on, and it's great to see you albeit, virtually. Let me sort of tell you why we were excited to have you on. This is, this podcast is about leadership. So, we're looking for leaders, and we're looking for leaders who actually can get things done.

We're at a point in our country and in the world, what I would argue, there are a lot of leaders who talk a lot, and then there are leaders who actually make things happen. And from the day I met you, I knew where you fit. And so, you were at Cisco, and we got the opportunity to interface with you, you were the Chief of Staff, but everybody described Ruba as the person to "make it happen."

Now you've, you've grown up to be a Senior Vice President and General Manager, which is a different level of leadership, but there's leadership at every level. So, I'm going to start at the beginning and just ask you: what is it about making things happen? Where does that intersect with philosophical or theoretical leadership?

RUBA: So it's funny… the intro, I appreciate the kind intro. Thank you so much. When I first started at Cisco, it was right when Chuck Robbins was announced as CEO and, you know, we

were sitting down together and one of the early meetings and I just said, "You know, what, what do you want me to do? Why did you hire me?"

And his response was, "I don't really know yet, but we need… we have a lot of shit to do, and you get shit done." So, it was an appropriate intro given that, that one story that I remember and, you know, there's absolutely a lot to get done. And when I think about, you know, how, how to, how to approach the… everybody's got more things to do than time. And I've always kind of approached what I do based on, you know, personally, based on where it's going to have the highest impact. So, as it ties to my career, what are the areas where I would always assess the strengths I had, assess where I want to go, and then what are the areas for development that will help me get there?

So, very much focused on development and then the highest return on that investment of time, because we just… time is the one non-renewable resource we have. So, when it comes to getting things done, it's absolutely prioritization and focusing on the highest impact and assessing where do we have strengths and things that will help us accelerate. What are the things that we need to work on and kind of talk about them very openly transparently and, and collaborate with each other in order to cross that chasm and hopefully achieve a high impact as a group.

STAN: Yeah, that's fascinating. And Chris and I met when he was a young SEAL officer and it became my aide, which was really like a Chief of Staff, and so we developed a relationship where I was dependent upon Chris to use his judgment, his energy, to make things happen. Then after that assignment, I went to the Pentagon and for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, I was the Director of the Joint Staff, so I was the Chief of Staff for that entity, several thousand people.

And I remember when I first got there, I asked him, "Why me? Why do you want me to do this? I don't know you," you know, and he goes, "Well, in the counter-terrorist fight, you attacked the enemy's network. I want, he said, you destroyed the network." And I said, "Okay, how's that relevant here?" He says, "I want you to do that here. I want you to destroy the network."

And I said, "Our network?" he said, "Right. I want you to dynamite how we do things and put it back together in a better way." So, when a leader, a "make it happen" person, like you, gets the running room to make it happen. What does that mean?

RUBA: It's, it's a really good question because I've got to say sometimes, you know, I didn't always know that that was the position I was in, but everybody else did, right? I was looked to as a, as a change agent, almost an agitator in some cases to question the status quo. And I think kind of step one, recognizing that and fully owning it is, is really important and easier said than done. At least in my case, I felt like it was easier said than done.

I was at the time, the first outsider that Chuck had brought into his leadership team. So, everyone else had been at Cisco for a while. And here I am, an outsider. I was the only millennial on the leadership team. And I'm coming in, to question what we're doing and also work with the executive leadership team on developing the transformation of the company. How do we evolve

our business model and look at it completely from the outside in? So market-first customer-first, as opposed to where we stand today.

And I think that it was spending time listening to the current organization and where they're coming from, aligning on some of the key objectives, whether it was a growth rate, whether it was certain technologies that they wanted to develop, certain customers that, you know, especially our sales teams had points of view on things that we were missing from the customers, finding those common objectives. And then bringing in… everyone brings in kind of their internal view. And then I'm bringing in an outside view to all help us work towards those common goals.

So absolutely my role was to challenge the status quo, but it was in service of a common objective, which is developing the, the transformation of the company, which was going to look different. If you know, we, we just had our earnings call a couple of days ago, for the third quarter of this fiscal year, and we are a different company in terms of how much we've grown. Software is a percentage of our business, how much we've grown recurring revenue versus net 30 as a percentage of our business, and that wasn't something that was going to happen just organically.

It really did take a lot of enforcement and change from the top down, but we had to align on those common goals and then work towards it as a team, even if we approached it from different perspectives.

CHRIS: Ruba, you noted in there, as a millennial entering that leadership team, and just through the law of averages, there, there aren't a lot of millennials leading at your level yet, certainly will be, obviously, but any early reflections there on how your… our worldview, our own experiences influences our leadership style. Any thoughts there on how that generation… it's hard to generalize too much, but might have a different worldview, that's going to drive a different sort of leadership culture moving forward?

RUBA: Yeah. Well, I'm not, I'm definitely not the youngest person in a room anymore, by a long shot. So, the millennial used to indicate kind of youth and no longer… now it is, you know, a lot of rank and file leaders. But I will say just independent of what generation. You know, I actually quote a fellow World Economic Forum, young global leader, her name is Belinda Parmar. And I quote the three attributes that she said leaders need today to be successful. And I think more than ever, independent of generation, independent of role, the three attributes are empathy. So, one, do you understand where people are coming from? The next is emotional intelligence, so are you self-aware and aware of how others also view you? And then the last piece is resilience.

Can you keep going when, when the going gets tough, which is frankly, how everything is these days, especially with all of the challenges and the volatility that we currently have thrown at us. So, I think, no matter the, you know, the age, industry, grade, public sector, private sector, I think all leaders need those three attributes of empathy, emotional intelligence, and resilience.
And I think those are the three I've drawn on the most as I've kind of evolved from a Chief of Staff role to, you know, leading a larger organization now.

CHRIS: Can I build on that? I mean, that's a, that's a great leadership model. You're obviously… you were in a leadership position, you think, as a leader. Going back, when did you start to feel or recognize the difference between doing things well and, and leading? I mean, that's a big transition point that folks go through and in the military and industry. You've obviously crossed that, that threshold. Any particular times when you started to see the importance of that different view?

RUBA: Yeah. I think there are a couple of times where it really started to kind of pivot, and I noticed some strong development in myself and it is something that I recognize is a continuous area for development for me.

I've always been someone who likes to solve problems. And, you know, I did a PhD for my graduate studies and it's quite a bit of independent work. There's some collaborative, but it's quite a bit of independent work. So, figuring out the answer, problem-solving things on my own, and even when I went to BCG, initially, you kind of own a module. You run a project, you're responsible for getting the answer.

And when you shift to leadership, it's less about the answer and more about asking the right questions and empowering others to come up with the right answer. And that's how you scale is, is guiding and asking questions, not coming up with the answers. And I think that that's a big shift, right? For someone who's used to kind of figuring it out and coming up with the answer. You can't scale, uh, by doing that. So, you have to empower other people to be able to come up with the answers and guide them and provide some boundary conditions and provide, you know, help them reach their potential and help them get to the best answers possible.

But that is a, that is a fundamental shift in how I have to think about my value and my contribution to the organization from having the answer to asking the right questions.

STAN: Yeah. I think you said a word earlier that, that I really want to pull on and that's empathy. Because I think a lot of people are confused on what empathy really is. I think they think it's, you're going to rub people's bellies and tell them you love them. And I don't think that's what it is. Ruba, described empathy in your view.

RUBA: And everyone does have their own definition. For me, it's understanding where someone is coming from. So, there's this famous quote that one of our Cisco board members said, is where you stand on an issue depends on where you're sitting." And so, in order to, to find common ground in order to help come up to a solution together, you've really got to understand where the other person is sitting and where they're coming from.

And one of the, you know, a simple tool that we've adopted, and I definitely adopted is, is something that we call "proximity conversations" in order to develop empathy. Which is take someone, anyone who's different from you - and the reality is everyone is different from you - but a different background, different race, different ethnicity, and so on. And just ask them about their life story and how they got to where they are, and just get proximate to them and

understand their life experience. And from there, building on that foundation, you actually find out that you have a lot in common, even with people who are completely different than you, then you can start building bridges together and working towards goals together.

And so, truly understanding where people are, in terms of their wellbeing, in terms of what's taking up their mindshare. Most recently, just last night, I did a session with some of the leadership team members in our India team. They're going through a lot right now. And even though the recent lockdowns have sort of stabilized the COVID, you know, surge numbers there, there's a lot of, I would use the term trauma with that team in terms of, they've seen a lot of their colleagues or a lot of their family members impacted, sick. Some, you know, unfortunately they've, they've experienced family members who've passed away. That's traumatic. And to think that, okay, now that even though things have stabilized, it's not back to business as usual. We've got to recognize the fact that there are some portion of their mind that's occupied by that concern and they're constantly thinking about it.

And so, acknowledging that upfront and saying, "How are you doing? What, how can I help? Are you, you know, can I provide some additional resources to support you on getting this done? Because you you've got other things that you've got to deal," with from a wellbeing or family perspective. But taking that time in order to move forward. And I think that that's something that I over-indexed on, certainly more in the past year than I had in the past before that. And I actually think that that's something we will continue to do hopefully. I will continue to do, absolutely, in the future is ask about the person first.

STAN: Yeah, I think that's incredibly powerful. I remember when I was in Afghanistan, my final assignment, I would go to parts of the country and I would sit down with leaders of tribes and whatnot, and they would speak a different language than me. They would have a different religion than me. They would have very different clothing, big turbans or whatever, if they were Pashtun in the south.

But the most important thing is they'd had a different life journey from me. And if I had taken their journey, I grew to understand I'd have their perspective and vice versa. It wasn't that I'm right, they're wrong, or vice versa. It's just the reality is we are products of our experiences. So your experience is a little different. When the Gulf War happened, you know, it was a Major in the Army, Chris was younger than me, everybody is. But you had an interesting background. Your parents had to make a decision to emigrate and they had to do it very quickly. And that has to have been part of the life journey that has affected how you think. Can you tell us about that?

RUBA: Yeah, I appreciate you bringing that up. The first time I met you, I actually shared that story with you, that we were both in the same place at the same time. It's in the early '90s.

STAN: Right.

RUBA: So, my family story and my personal story, it's absolutely the core of what motivates me every single day. And I don't shy away from talking about it because I think it's important for everyone to know what motivates them. You know, we've got a lot of challenges in life, and if

you know what motivates you, it keeps you going when, when times get tough. So, in 1990, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, my family was living in Kuwait. I'm Palestinian, my family is Palestinian and we were stateless because we Palestinians weren't granted citizenship. And when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, he decreed that those were the American citizens, could be shot on site or, or taken in.

And one of my sisters was born in the United States. So, the US Embassy called my parents and said, "You've got three days to decide if you want to evacuate," and moved to the United States. Three days for girls, all under the age of 10, and leave everything behind. Leave your home, all of our assets were frozen, you couldn't go to a bank and get anything, and just leave it all behind the life that they've had prior to that.

and the reality is for Palestinians, there was really nowhere to go, and, and the US accepted us. And in fact, the day that we became US citizens, my father, who was stateless his entire life said, "I finally feel like a human being and recognized as a human being."

So they came to the United States and gave everything up just for us to have opportunity. And so, I do believe that if you've got the opportunity and you've got the capability, then you have a responsibility to achieve your potential. And so that really pushed me to always take it as far as I could go. So, whether that's getting a PhD in graduate school, whether that's continuing to push myself and in the professional field and in the technology industry, I just always know that it motivates me to do my best, but more importantly, it motivates me to help others achieve their potential and do their best.

And so that's been something that constantly fuels me is, is being able to see something in other people and bring it out of them. I am so proud when people tell me you saw something in me that I didn't see in myself, and I was able to achieve something that I didn't think I could. That's my, my favorite feedback conversation I have with folks when I have it, because that, that root motivation and that experience I had as a young child and what my parents gave up for me in seeing our potential and, and giving everything up to help us realize it. I want to pay that forward.

STAN: Well, I think the other thing Ruba, too, is even if someone never speaks to you, the fact that you are doing what you're doing, the fact that the journey is known to them and what you've been able to do it, it's an inspiration. It's a little bit of prod if they're not, you know, if they're a little bit lazier, they they've got an excuse for why they can't do something because you haven't let excuses stop you.

RUBA: I think that everyone, you know, I, I do want to do people are at different points in their life and, and are capable of doing things differently depending on where they are in the journey. So I do try to, I will say, I've had to also mentally adjust a little bit on that, where I used to kind of feel like everybody had to run as hard as I do. That was another learning. So, Chris, back to one of your earlier questions, that was a learning for me.

Not everyone is constantly operate, not everyone's operating at the same speed, whether it's constantly or different points in their life. So, I definitely do have to recognize that as well is that, you know, we've got a modulate based on what we're able to give at any point in time. So that's been, that's been a big learning for me as well as not everyone is going to do things the way that I do them, but that doesn't mean that they're not going to come out with a good outcome or even a better outcome than what I would do.

And I do remember my first manager role. I had a very, very talented individual working on my team. Her name is Julia Chen and I was trying to micromanage everything she was doing. I'm like, "Look, I know how it should be done. This is how we've got to come out with the outcome. This is the right answer." And, and I couldn't scale because I was managing other people as well. And I just couldn't spend, you know, 12 hours with each person micromanaging everything they were doing. So, I kind of left her alone for a little while, and asked her, you know, here's, here's the ultimate outcome we're trying to get to.

Here's the problem we're trying to solve for the client. Go figure it out. And I got to say, she came out with a much better outcome than what I could've done, trying to dictate what she would do. And she didn't do it, how I would do it. She approached it in a very different way, but it was a much better outcome. And that's where I saw, you know, actually giving people space and empowering them and kind of giving them the vision and the mission if you will, but not defining how they get there, results in a superior outcome. So that was a big learning for me as a first-time manager.

CHRIS: Stan and I spoke with a friend recently who was one of the first women to get through Ranger School and like yourself, that's like [the] fifth most impressive thing she's done in her life. And she said, yeah, one of the early lessons she had similarly like wired, very, very hot, very intense action-action-action. And one of her leadership epiphanies was around one of her teammates' staff that worked for her saying after she showed up and said, "Okay, here's what we're gonna do today," this other person turned to her and say, I'"m doing fine. Thank you for asking."

Like this, this wake up moment says not everybody just is, you know, a hundred percent action in every moment. So I think it's an, a really important lesson that you bring up. I'd love to… you mentioned when, when you first met, you were serving in a Chief of Staff role. I was Chief of Staff to Stan and as he described, served in that role multiple times.

I like to think at, at their best, senior leaders are looking for certain types of characteristics and potential. They're going to benefit from pulling the right person on and that person's going to benefit from seeing the organization at a more strategic level than they might otherwise in their career.

So, I'm curious now, as being back in the executive level, lessons you took away from that role when it comes to creating your own staff or how, how that shaped you, or maybe accelerated your ability to lead at a more strategic level having spent time there.

RUBA: So first and foremost is, you know, it goes back to that emotional intelligence and self-awareness piece. So, knowing what my strengths are, and being very aware of my weaknesses and areas for improvement. And I will say, you know, one of my weaknesses and areas for improvement is actually fun. So having, having someone and who continues to, you know, maintain a collegial attitude and, and fun on the team, that's extremely important for a team.

It's not my strength, so I surround myself with people who are more fun than I am. I surround my people with… surround myself with individuals who complement my capability. So, where I have 10 years of experience and focus on strategy, where I understand technology, I have folks who are extremely operationally rigorous, who are able to translate strategy to execution.

So I surround myself with folks who, who complement and augment my capabilities. And we're truly a team together. It's not just, we're all following, you know, my vision, or what I dictate, but we are truly a team together. I often say something that I borrowed from a customer, which is, "I don't like decisions. I like conclusions." because the decision indicates like one person kind of dictated it and moved on. And a conclusion indicates that with the information we have at hand, this is the most sensible logical path to go down.

And it's a conclusion that we come to together and maybe it's an imperfect answer, but it's actually the best available solution at the time. And so, that is a statement I use with the team pretty regularly in order to make sure that we're all aligned because there's just, there's just too much to do for us to be rowing in different directions. So, as I thought about assembling my team, it was complementing and saying that we've all got to conclude things together because not one of us has all of the information on our own to decide where to go.

CHRIS: It's a great point that, decision versus conclusion. I'm laughing, when you, when you described the building of the team, I completely agree. Like you're able to see that when you're at that staff level. Great takeaway from that. And there's a sort of a truism inside of Special Operations. I could, you could walk into a Ranger platoon right now, somewhere around the world, a SEAL platoon, whatever it is it's, you're going to find about 20 people. There's going to be the funny person. There's going to be the nerd. There's going to be the super athlete. There's just… these… they just happen organically. There's something about… for a really effective team. There has to be the fun person, right. And that'll just emerge, like maybe not as funny as the person in the next platoon, but they are going to have that role inside that, that, that highly effective team.

And so, building that out with, through a deliberate lens, when you have the opportunity as a leader, I think is a great takeaway.

RUBA: Yeah. And I think Chris, it just ties to the importance of diversity on a team, whether it's, you know, diversity of ethnicity, gender, tenure, experience capability. It really results in better outcomes to have that diversity represented at the table in order to, to provide the best solution.

I mean, our customers are, are just as diverse as the world around us. So, we absolutely want to be able to have teams that reflect that as well.

STAN: Ruba, when I think of Cisco, I think of networking. And I first got to know about the company in the early '90-s, got to visit it when I was a regular General and they took some of us out there to see how different California firms operated.

We've just been through a year plus of networking for the average American in ways that we hadn't before at a level of intensity. I'm going to ask you now to look into the future. Where's this taken, what's it going to look like a year, two years from now? How much has the availability of that technology going to change the way we work and the way we live?

RUBA: It's a great question. I mean, at this stage, every company has recognized the importance of digital transformation. It's almost become cliche to talk about digital transformation because it's just how business gets done.

You know, I think Cisco acquired the technology that's underlying WebEx back in 2007, but it took a global pandemic to get everybody else to, to start using video conferencing technology for running business. And that acceleration has, it's just gone into overdrive now.

So if, if you look at the future, what, I, I don't have a crystal ball, but I, you know, I can think about some things that are necessary and some inevitables. So, some inevitables include that 96 plus percent of every meeting going forward is going to have someone who is remote. So, you've got to ensure that that experience provides an inclusive experience, allows people to collaborate with each other, and is secure. So the inclusion piece that's, what's really exciting, is that digital technology is now going to allow individuals who in the past felt like maybe they were introverts. I'm actually an introvert. So, I used, I had to work really hard to be able to jump in and meetings. I felt like it was the Speech Olympics, but now we've got technology that points out, "Hey, this person hasn't spoken in a while." Should, should you, as a leader running the meeting ask them to, you know, what their opinion is?

Or we can have technology that if, even if some people are remote and some people are in person in the meeting, is it going to put them all on equal boxes or do you have kind of 10 people in a room with tiny heads and others who are kind of showing up and not engaged? Real-time translation allowing that collaboration, so the individuals who in the past felt like they couldn't be included now could join because they're hearing in real time translated to their language.

So that's, that's something that is going to stay, that's an inevitability. I think the future of security is going to be another inevitability that we have to continue to design towards is how do we authenticate? Is the person that I'm talking to actually, who I want to be talking to, or the device or the thing. I think that's that identity and security are going to be paramount to everything in the future because it's it, everything is now digital.

So, you can't always guarantee that who you're talking to without that authentication. So I would say inclusion, security, are kind of two inevitable that I would design towards in the future as we look forward.

STAN: Ruba, you're probably already doing this, but if not, I'm going to give you a great business idea. If you could have something with a button that if I press it, a person gets an electric shock if I don't think they're paying attention, or they're saying something I disagree with, can you work that?

RUBA: That is not part of our business model, Stan, so we're going to leave that one. But I do think actually noticing, you know, if someone's engaged or not engaged, is really key because it's hard to just stay focused when you're communicating digitally for 12+ hours a day. It's, it's actually quite mentally and, you know, energy taxing. So ensuring that people are fully engaged and finding ways to engage them in a conversation. That's absolutely something that our collaboration teams are focused on, is what are the, the things that you can insert into a conversation to just kind of wake people up, whether it's a quick poll, you know, word cloud, get everybody to vote on something together.

Just, just insert that energy boost briefly to make sure that they're engaged in the discussion. Cause it's, it's exhausting after a while to just do this for a few hours, for 12 hours a day. I think we're seeing that kind of across the globe, of fatigue from, from video conferencing.

CHRIS: It's yeah, it's a much different behavior. And obviously in your space, the world, we grew up in then, living in this digital leadership realm for quite a while. So, it's been fascinating to watch over the last 12, 18 months, the world catching up to that.

You laid out some of it. I'm curious any other thoughts on… if I'm optimistic about something coming out of this year, it's that we've accelerated what that's going to look like by 10 years, maybe. I don't know. The behavior is so much more normalized. And from, from the outside, like the Hollywood image of Special Operations is one thing. In reality, a lot of it was, kind of nerdy conversations, around knowledge management, and communication infrastructure, and all these things that we knew needed to be in place to be able to get what's inside of people's heads and connect us as real people.

It wasn't just a bunch of emails floating around. So, we used to imagine like the operation center of the future, where, you know, all the walls are, are smart and movable. And I can just call up your headquarters and suddenly this whole wall tall turns into your side of, on the other side of the world, it's you and your team.

So, we're not muting and unmuting, we're just sharing space. I mean, that type of future seems like it's much closer to us now, as a result of people recognizing that there is going to be this 90% of meetings going to have someone to remote. And it shouldn't be this one small screen that has to, you know, unmute and say, "Excuse me, can I jump in here?" Because we just know that's not as effective.

Do you, do you have a similar sort of optimism that we've pulled, pulled things forward?

RUBA: Oh, absolutely. I think one thing that we've learned in the past year is that, the risk tolerance has gone up. Because no one had any idea how this was going to pan out. And so I'll,

I'll give you just an example, from my team. But I think it applies to nearly everyone, whether it's a company or, you know, non-profit organizations or government.

So what I mean by the risk tolerance, was lowered or, or rather the risk tolerance was increased, so we were willing to take more risks, that did accelerate digital adoption. And I think that that's going to continue to be a trend in the future, but what we saw was that, people were willing to try new things because they didn't have an alternative. So, they're like, yeah, I will try, you know, video conferencing because otherwise I can't run my business.

On my team, we had to take over 10,000 engineers and have them work from home, something to him, not done before. It was an in-office model for, for my team and our workload tripled overnight just increased by 300% and we just looked at our innovation pipeline and rather than do what we normally would do, which is pilot, measure, test, increase, expand the pilot, remeasure, and then roll it out. We launched and released all of the innovations we had in our pipeline at once.

Just launched them out there. And because our workload had increased so much, we knew we were measuring the customer satisfaction on every single transaction. So, we had a lot more data, to harvest to see what worked and what didn't work. And so, within a few hours, within a few days, we knew which innovations were here to stay and were going to work, and which ones we've got to pull out. And so that has actually allowed my team to just appreciate that we're willing to take more risks and we can innovate faster, and we'll test faster. We don't need to go through this slow process of rolling out a pilot and then scaling it and then kind of getting it to all of our customers.

We can just test things quickly and measure a hundred percent of the transactions. And if it works, great, if it doesn't, we'll adjust and move forward. But that is a shift in the amount of risk that, that my team is willing to tolerate. And I think that the pandemic kind of pushed us to do that. And I, I wouldn't say that that's just unique to my team. I think a lot of organizations have, have increased, the amount of risk they're willing to take, to just to, and to see that when it works out, it actually yields dividends. So, for us, we actually have now the highest customer satisfaction score from when we started measuring.

And it's very much driven by this innovation. And if we had not launched this innovation, I got to say our teams would have been drowning, figuratively drowning in the amount of work that they had. And it would have resulted in a subpar customer experience. But because we released that innovation, it not only helped address the additional workload, but it resulted in a superior customer outcome.

And I think a lot of companies, a lot of organizations, a lot of people in the world are seeing that the more they innovate and they're willing to take risks, it could result in a much better outcome than if they just kept going the sort of organic route.

STAN: Wow. Talk about taking risks. I'm going to take some now because I'm going to cheat nest. I'm supposed to ask one final question, but I'm going to ask two. Because the first, is we've

just gone through it, a pandemic, and I cannot imagine what would have happened had we been 25 years ago and not had the digital connectivity, how society would have operated, but we do see vulnerabilities.

We see hacking of the pipeline. We see, you know, that the Texas power issue when it's not hacking, but it's, it's things networked together have associated vulnerabilities. How do you think about that going forward? What do you think our nation, how should we put our minds around that particular challenge?

RUBA: So, technology infrastructure is, is critical infrastructure. I think we're starting to get the recognition of that, especially in, in the past year. It is critical infrastructure. We've got to start treating it as that. I used to say that, you know, the, the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy was connectivity because you need that to be able to do anything. And I think, and I, you know, we, we said that a few years ago, when we, when we debuted a Cisco strategy at one of our conferences, and it is been proven true now more than ever, is that when you need connectivity to be able to do anything. So it's critical infrastructure and it's necessary, for our kind of economic future as a country, it's really necessary from a competitive advantage perspective for us.

I mean, getting that last mile connectivity, making sure that we're connecting the unconnected. And I would expand it beyond just the United States. I think we do have a responsibility to do that to the rest of the world that doesn't have connectivity as well, because we've shown that, it does result in more innovation. It does result in more economic activation and, and that, you know, supports everyone's productivity and it's just a better outcome for, for our species. So, I think that the recognition that it's critical infrastructure, but also the recognition that we've got our responsibility to help connect the unconnected, for just future viability, economic viability of our country, as well as others, I think is really important.

STAN: Well, that's great. I'm going to ask the last question. It's very personal. You know, as we rise up, many people who are mission focused, almost feel guilty. If they're taking a moment to relax or to read a novel, or to rest, or to eat, or any number of the sort of the basic things. And yet you learn as you get senior, if you don't do those, you're not the leader you ought to be. So, how do you sort of manage Ruba's life so that you can be the senior leader that you want to be? It's a really great question because I don't think I discovered how to balance that until my mid-thirties. It took me a while. I very much was a, you know, burn the candle at both ends and work as much as I had time available.

And what I realized is, as my scope expanded, my ability to context-switch became more of an important skill. And I couldn't context-switch well, if I didn't take care of my mental and physical health. And I actually will credit my previous boss, Chuck Robbins, with that. He straight up told me that the days that I haven't gotten enough sleep or I haven't worked out, I'm not as quick. And so, it became a performance advantage for me to get some sleep and work out.

So now, I absolutely do not compromise on those two things, sleep and exercise. They are fundamental. And I think even in the past year, with the pandemic, they became a lot more

important because I just had even a lot more context-switching that I had to do dealing with so many different issues that I wasn't expecting to deal with or didn't have experience dealing with before.

And that taking care of my physical health and mental health with exercise and sleep has become really key to doing that. So it's something that I don't compromise on, but it took me a while to really learn that and build that in, but it is a competitive advantage. So, for those who are the old me, who just work all the time, it's, you know, it's time to kind of shift gear and see just how much better you can perform when you take care of yourself.

And it makes you appreciate when other people take care of themselves too, because they will perform better. So now I do push that on others as well, making sure that they sleep and they take care of their health.

STAN: Perfect.

CHRIS: The key lesson there is, you're learning that from your former boss, giving you the time and space to take care of yourself, because it… very few people will do that on their own. They're going to burn the candle until someone says it's… they have to focus on other priorities. Really just such a great discussion, we're grateful for your time, know how exceptionally busy you are. And, as a receiver of so much important technology stands point over the last year and a half, and then the last 20 years, frankly, just to a debt of gratitude to the work you and your team are doing.

Thank you. And thank you so much for the partnership. You've all been just super helpful to us as we've tried to tackle some pretty big challenges and just the learnings that you've brought really appreciate the partnership and appreciate the discussion today. Thank you.

STAN: Our honor. Thank you, Ruba.

CHRIS: Thanks, Ruba.

So, great discussion with Ruba, not surprising. I think we both knew going into that, that she was going to offer some, some really interesting insights. Um, I'm gonna, I'm going to turn it over to you for opening thoughts on it, because you, you, you had originally met Ruba before I did, and knew her, in sort of her, extremely focused role as a Chief of Staff, and now has moved on to, understandably to, running a business unit there. And we'll continue to do great things, but I'm curious what jumped out at you the most in this discussion?

STAN: Yeah, it's interesting because as you said, the first word I would have probably associated with her is accomplishment, both personal accomplishments and then accomplishments in the organization. She's a driver. She makes herself accomplish things. She makes the organization accomplish things, but the word that jumped out at me was empathy, as that came up in the conversation.

And I wouldn't have expected that with someone in the two-dimensional view that I first got Ruba.

CHRIS: Yeah, clearly I can think of other folks in our, in our world that we worked with over the years, and then in our consulting practice where we'll both reflect and say, that is, that is a person who, who is studying their environment themselves to become a better leader. And she seems like, certainly comes across as one of those people. Like I am being very deliberate about understanding my strengths, my weaknesses, because I want to lead people well, and I want to have a positive impact on this, on this organization.

I think her, her recognition of a strength when it comes to given her background, I think you can understand where that comes from, but her, her empathy towards others, trying to understand where they're coming from, what's their history before you try to lead them - really jumped out at me and that's, that's such a good takeaway.

Because it's, it's something else all of us can implement and all of us, the majority of us forget to do. But a lot of those, a lot of her comments tell you that, you know, the best leaders are also constantly pushing themselves to, to become better leaders through, through practice, and how they approach others.

STAN: You know, I think about it. I was born into a stable family. I'm an American citizen because I was born into an American family in the United States. And I can take all that for granted. And Ruba started with a question mark. There was nothing that said she'd get the opportunity because her family had to leave so suddenly.

And there was nothing said that she would, you know, achieve as many things as she has. So, I think that makes two things in her. One, it probably increases the drive, but it also increases the appreciation that other people have a story. And it's not always the same. It's not the vanilla, easy story. It is often marked with a number of challenges.

CHRIS: One of the things that she said that has stuck with me, I've been playing with it, is this idea that, she said, "I don't, I don't like decisions. I like conclusions." And I know we always encourage leaders: be precise in your language. It's the reason we talk about describing where you are in decision. I'm in phase one on this decision, I'm in phase two of another. Other things that we try to help leaders pull into their, into their language as they talk with their teams. I'm, I'm curious what you, what you thought of that? I don't, I don't like decisions. I like conclusions. I've never framed that in, in a conversation, but I like it.

I'm not, I want to tease it out more in my own head, because I'd want to be very specific about when it's being used. But something about that jumps out at me, like asking a team, have we just decided to do this? Or have we concluded that it's the right thing to do?

STAN: Yeah, I think that's great. When she said it, I immediately connected to something we used to say in Iraq, because you talk to people and say, "What are we doing?" And someone

would respond, "We're fighting the War on Terror." And we'd say, "No, we're not. We're here to win the War on Terror."

The outcome is the point of it all. We're going to do stuff, but if we don't have clarity on what it is the outcome should be, the conclusion is, then we're apt to sort of, as I say, dog paddle and circles doing things that don't really matter.

CHRIS: Yeah. One of, one of the films that I made my wife suffer through on more than one occasion that was a recommended by you, but it was watched by so many in the force going back years, *The Battle of Algiers*, which talks about the French forces, in an insurgency, you know, half a century ago or more. And it really, the, the point of the story is that it says, this is an incredibly hard way to face conflict, for both sides suffers both, both, both forces and the local population will suffer in this.

And so, we all watched it during Afghanistan and Iraq, especially to try to learn lessons, but one of the scenes that always jumps out to me, I think connects to this where the, the leader of the, the French forces is getting pressured by… some media folks and they're asking a certain types of questions and he steps back and says, "You're asking the wrong questions. The question is, 'Should we be here?'" Or something to that extent, but, but it, but it's always stuck with me. That leaders should be constantly asking… they should know the right questions to be asking themselves at all times. And so, when they hear people asking or making the wrong comments, they can say, "No, no, no, elevate it. Here's the question that we should be asking ourselves, 'Are we winning? Have we made a decision or conclusion?'" And that's a, it's just a great tale of a, a leader that thinks at a different, a different level.

STAN: Yeah, I think it's a great contribution you can make to the organization and particularly young people, because we do often confuse that what we're doing in the moment with what we should be doing. And if you can't draw a direct line to what you want the outcome really to be.

CHRIS: Yeah. That's right. But if I'm honest, my, probably my biggest takeaway from this is I have to do more with my life, because when you look at someone like Ruba and she, you know, she shared her, her, her sort of backstory and how she grew up in the, the challenges that her parents faced, uh, when she was just a young kid, like to your point where I was living this plush middle middle-class lifestyle, to look at what she's done and how far she's moved herself, but also the organizations she's been associated with, in just a short amount of time. It's really, it's an incredibly impressive. And, I'm sure you just listened to her and you know, she's going to have a continued, strong and important impact on anybody she works with or works for her.

STAN: Well, here's an idea for one of our future guests, we go find a complete loser. And someone who's accomplished nothing and isn't ever going to, and then we can feel a little bit better about ourselves.

CHRIS: That'd be, that'd be, that'd be a great idea. Walk away, feeling a little more positive.

STAN: Then we can tell them you're on to make the rest of us in the world, all our listeners feel better.

CHRIS: I think, I think I might serve that role for people like Ruba. Like I'm actually getting a lot done. W ell, great discussion. We appreciate her and her team for making the time. And, and thanks to all of you for listening in.