

Sam Kennedy *No Turning Back*

CHRIS: Really great discussion coming up here with Sam Kennedy. If you are from Boston, you will know the name. Sam is the CEO of the Boston Red Sox - which is a position of massive pressure.

If you understand the sports world, especially an institution like the Red Sox, he's been there for many years. He'll talk about that. So, the length of his career in baseball, professional sports, but [he's] done the bulk of it there with the Red Sox and ultimately moving up to assume that the role of President and CEO.

He is a... he was a non-obvious discussion for me. My expectation was that we were going to talk a lot more about sports, about players, about recruiting, managing, sort of, salary base and the negotiations that go on inside of this professional sports realm. But it wasn't that. There's some of that, obviously, to set context, what I think you'll find in Sam Kennedy is a leader who understands the universal truths of leadership.

He talks about the importance of individuals from the folks working in the parking lot, to taking care of Fenway Park, to managing the concessions, all the way down to the folks on the field as part of this broad mission to obviously win games and perform on the field, but also to represent the people of Boston and to hold it as sacred the institution that they are tasked with protecting while they're in these positions.

And he talks a lot about how important that team is, the Red Sox to their, to the city, the connectedness, they all feel, and the duty he feels as the President and CEO to protect that and leave it in good place for the next generation. For me, reflecting on the discussion, it felt like I was talking to a great military leader, a great president of a university, folks that really understand, "this has been here before I got here and will outlive me. My job is to protect it and improve it so that we can fulfill our mission and leave something better for the next folks that take over our roles."

So just a great discussion. I think you'll enjoy it, everybody. as much as Stan and I did.

So, now over to Sam Kennedy.

STAN: Sam, we've been really excited to have you on. One, because I'm a big baseball fan, but also, I'm a big fan of yours as well. However, I'll admit the first day we met, I thought you were a great talent scout and I offered you a 66-year-old right-hander for the bullpen and you didn't, you didn't grab at it.

You'd be the only team with one and I'm free, but... We stood, you took me into Fenway Park. You took me on the grass and left field, which I think is sacred ground. We went inside the Green Monster and I remember standing there thinking, "You know, my life sucks. If I could do anything over, I want to be Sam Kennedy."

But now I got to ask the question. If I were Sam Kennedy. What would I do? What is it you actually do?

SAM: Well, that's a question my wife asks me about every day. First of all, Stan and Chris, let me say thank you for having me. It's a privilege to be with you both. And, after we met in leftfield at Fenway Park in the height of the COVID response, and thank you for your service to our country, but also to the great city of Boston, which is what I really care most about. It was just surreal to be standing there with you, a true American hero, because for those of us who work in the sports industry, we realized that we are in a... what we call the "toy department of life."

We are very, very fortunate to be in an industry that hopefully provides a distraction and some joy and allows people to escape from the realities of their day-to-day lives, whether it's work or, threats from... domestic threats or threats from abroad, or just all of the news and information that's being pounded in our brains every day. So, we very much see the sports industry as an escape from the realities of our day-to-day lives and importantly, a connection back to our youth and a time when we could dream big dreams. And think about the possibility like you playing in the Major Leagues and being a part of a baseball team or a football team or basketball or hockey.

And what I get to do every day... it was a long windup to answer your question. I am blessed with the opportunity to work alongside some of the greatest teammates you could ever ask for - probably a lot like your backgrounds and experiences. My job is to make sure that each individual within our organization is a functioning member of our team and they are positioned with the resources to be successful. And sometimes those resources come in the form of cash dollars, to go out and spend either on players or on renovations for Fenway Park or investments into real estate, or investments into scouting or analytics. Sometimes the resources are additional people, it could be support, lending a hand to a teammate who's working on a complex project.

But I think that's the most important role that I play is just making sure that whether it's our field manager, our general manager who picks all the players, whether it's our Chief Financial Officer, our head of sales and marketing, just making sure that I'm there as a resource and supporting them in their effort to pull this team together.

Ultimately our goal... we wake up every day thinking about three things at the Red Sox. Number one is winning. If we're not doing more and more every day to win games, we're doing something wrong. Number two is Fenway Park, the ballpark, making sure we're doing no harm to Fenway and enhancing it, expanding it.

And three is how are we being active in our community and giving back? So, we try to focus on those three areas each and every day and make sure our leadership team is working in that direction. And that's really what I do each and every day. And it is a blessing to work in this, in this industry.

It's changed so much over the last 20 years and really grown into big business, given the franchise valuations. And it's been... it's fun to be a part of it. I've been in baseball since 1993, and it continues to grow and evolve each and every year.

CHRIS: Wow. Sam, I want to dive a little deeper on the, some of that internal, I mean, there's a lot to talk about what you just mentioned, but let's start with the leadership model inside of your team, right. And one of the points we, I learned this in the military, we talk about it with organizations that we work with all the time. The org chart on the wall does not really tell you how the organization runs or who's in charge, right. And one of the early lessons you learned in the special operations community, acutely true in the SEAL teams because of the culture of the small units, is you come in as a young officer, and you're the, you know, you're the CEO of that 20-person unit, theoretically.

But there are very experienced, more battle-tested operators that are reporting to you, this, you know, wet behind the ears, brand new officer in that environment. And so, you have to learn to navigate where your accountability is, what you need to be in charge of, and where you need to have respect for those that have an informal authority. But one that has far greater impact in certain circumstances and the best units, establish those relationships through trust and understanding. Those that don't succeed, never find the balance between those two realities.

So, when you think of your team, or in sport in general, what are the different parts of leadership that make an effective franchise work?

SAM: Well, I think it's a great question. It's very, very analogous to the sports world and baseball specifically. In our case, that trust and understanding has to be developed between the ownership group first, because ultimately at the end of the day, we all work for the investment group.

Our group is led by John Henry and Tom Werner, and they have 18 investors. And so, we are part of this larger sports and entertainment enterprise. They entrust me to handle the day-to-day operations of the Boston Red Sox. They also own a soccer team over in England, Liverpool Football Club. They have a media company, New England Sports Network, and each individual business has a unit leader, if you will, and I am entrusted with the day-to-day of the Red Sox, but make no mistake, the owners and the board of directors have the governance and the control and, you know, any decisions that we make or, or recommend have to be signed off on by that ownership group, certain decisions just by John Henry and Tom Werner. Other decisions need to go out to the broader board.

But the day-to-day running of the company, the entity of the Boston Red Sox is very analogous to what you were describing, Chris. We have to build that trust and understanding between the on-field personnel and the off-field personnel, because there is no way that on-field personnel, really should be listening or taking advice from someone like me or another executive in leadership who has never worn the uniform or played or participated at that level.

But if you can build the trust and understanding for them to realize that our job is simply to make sure that they have what they need to be successful in their role, either as a coach manager, pitching coach, batting coach, or a player.

Our job is to give them what they need to be successful and then sort of back away and let them do their thing. That is how you create, I think, a great team and a culture where you can let the team flourish. It gets particularly difficult when you have a model and a set-up as we do it in front offices in baseball, where you have, an executive in our case, Chaim Bloom is our general manager, and he and his team get together and work on deciding which personnel belong in that clubhouse and dugout environment. So, the people in the dugout, in the clubhouse working together, didn't select each other. They were chosen to be together by someone who sits in the front office and has never been in that environment in uniform out on the field, out in the battle.

So, it's a very interesting dynamic. And it only comes with a lot of, you said the exact words, trust and understanding and listening, and you see sports organizations and sports teams come unwound. You see dissension when there's not great communication, collaboration and trust. In our 20 years, we've had some very high highs and some low lows, the victories and defeats have been stark, and you see the great success comes when you have that trust and that understanding, and the relationships and the collaboration when there is that mistrust and you don't have good communication things fall apart very quickly.

CHRIS: Just, a quick follow-up on that - that last point it's so important. It happens in professional sports. It happens everywhere. I've seen it in the military, in small units and big units. When you go through, when you see a franchise go through that there's a scandal, there's a tension between players and whatever it might be, and that trust starts to diminish.

Where do you start to rebuild it? Or do you see organizations that just try to put their head in the ground and act like it's not a problem, which is it rarely will work?

SAM: Yeah. I think, you know, human instinct is so interesting to study and examine. I think the best organizations that have, you know, good leaders are very vulnerable, and can open up and, and essentially question themselves and say, "What did we do wrong here? Why did this issue happen or where did we go the wrong way?" And it's usually process. Because sometimes, you know, you can have a great process and, you know, things may work out. They also may not work out, but if you have a good process, usually the outcomes are better, by and large, if you don't have a good process. So, what we will typically do is go back and look at the process that led to a certain decision or outcome, try and make sure that we didn't miss a step along the way. And we do have a culture with our ownership group where that ... it sort of starts with them. They're constantly questioning their own decision-making, business decisions, baseball decisions, media decisions, soccer, operations decisions. And so, we have this sort of embedded into our DNA.

The willingness to question, look back, make the hard decisions, but when they go wrong, not say this is gonna, you know, cost someone their job or, you know, create a culture of fear. I think

just the opposite. We have a culture of wanting to question and examine when something goes wrong.

What led to that outcome? In fact, I think it might be somewhat of an obsession and maybe we should celebrate our successes a little bit more than we do, but we work for a group of investors that are highly, highly driven for on-field success. This is not a business-only venture. Most of our... all of our partners had very successful careers and businesses in other arenas, they brought their experiences, their wealth, their talents to the sports industry with this purpose of winning championships. And so that's a great group to work with, because that's really what they care about, and it allows this environment of constantly questioning how we're operating.

STAN: Sam, I love that, that questioning how you're operating. And what I do is expand that a little bit during the Civil War, Union General William Sherman, didn't like the press, and he once had a quote that said, "America has no shortage of great strategists. They just all write for newspapers." And the point I'm getting to, is you have a job what you described so well, but your job is being done in a fishbowl. You not only have a set of owners, you've also got a set of de facto stakeholders, all the fans of the Boston Red Sox, all the citizens of Boston, all people who used to be citizens in Boston and now live in Florida somewhere else who watch what you do with incredible scrutiny.

And again, they're all... they're more qualified or at least they think they're more qualified to make decisions than anybody in the leadership of the team. So, I really want to focus on the personal side of that leading in a fishbowl. How does it feel? How do you respond to it? What advice do you have for people in that environment?

SAM: Well, it's a great question and boy, General Sherman was prescient. It is assessment of the media way back then during the Civil War era. I think, you know, my wiring is ...it comes from obviously my parents and the DNA that you are born with, and it is I believe of great optimism and hope and positivity.

And so, I think our media coverage, the scrutiny, you know, being in the fishbowl, walking in, I have a very unhealthy habit of walking into Dunkin' Donuts every single morning for the past 20 years while living in Boston. And you know, you go into Dunkin' Donuts and you order your coffee and invariably you see a Red Sox fan and they'll complain about the game last night or trading Mookie Betts for the Dodgers or some major decision that they disagree with.

Because if you don't win 162 games and every playoff game in the world series every single year, you're open for criticism. But I did have the experience early in my career to work for a different club, the New York Yankees. And then I transitioned out to the San Diego Padres for a seven year stretch and then came back home to Boston.

And what happens is you realize this market is unlike... this fishbowl here is unlike any other in baseball and sports. And what I take a very positive view of that. While it's tough to read criticism of your teammates, you know, either in uniform or on field or of yourself, and you worry that your mom and dad are going to be upset by the criticism or your wife or your kids.

You have to think, how amazing is it that our fan base cares? They're so passionate and the media specifically in Boston, our beat reporters, are so smart and talented and into the game and into our organization. And that doesn't exist everywhere across the country.

There is apathy, the team is not as important. And you think about, you know, General Sherman in the Civil War, you know, what he was doing, what he was fighting for. We are a public trust. You know, I think John Henry, Tom Werner, our ownership group, they realize they aren't really the owners of the team in the sense of, you know, I own that building.

They are sort of the stewards of a public trust that is so much bigger than them. And they are a part of something that's so important as an institution to the city and the region that if you look at it that way, you realize why this fishbowl environment exists because people care so much. And ultimately that from a business perspective, that passion and interest fuels everything we're doing.

And so, we're able to harness that passion, enthusiasm, generate the revenues make the right business decisions, to then fuel those resources into the team, into the operation. And we've won four world series championships in the 20 years. We did question what will happen when we win our first one and will there be apathy?

And actually, what happened is there has been hunger for more. Now, I think that has a lot to do with what the Patriots have done, and the Bruins and the Celtics. It's been this magical time in Boston sports where the hunger for more and more and more championships is there. So, the apathy doesn't exist.

But the anger does when you mess up. And that's a good thing. Passion and interest is a good thing and you have to take it that way and not get upset and realize it's because it's rooted in this. It's not that the fans want you to fail, or they don't like you, it's that they care so much about their team.

STAN: That's brilliant.

CHRIS: Yeah, it's a really... I love that idea of a stewardship of the brand rather than ownership. One of the, in the SEAL teams where I grew up, one of the points that we would consistently try to make to younger members, and even to this day now being long out of the community, you know, knowing when people join the SEAL teams if I'm connected with them in any way the day they get their warfare insignia, so the Trident that you would wear on your uniform, sort of like the day you get your uniform on a team like yours, try to make the point that you're the steward of what that represents. You don't own it. It's going to be on your chest for a few years, for 20 years, maybe more, and then it's not, and you are stepping into a brand that others have built.

And your job is to take care of it and improve it during your career, and then hand it off to someone else. So, you have to protect what it is that that represents to others, the community, the nation, the city in your case. So, in that vein... in the military use the term center of gravity, right?

If you're trying to really pick apart a complex problem, whether it's an adversary or understanding yourselves, what is the center of gravity that holds this thing together? And we can build a plan around that insight.

In the SEAL teams, I always consider our center of gravity in our name, that the team aspect, if we started to lose our ability to connect as a team... at the small unit level, and then up, the capability would wither, right? There are not superhuman beings in the special operations community, maybe as opposed as professional sports, right?

The power of those come from the ability of, you know, relatively normal people to be able to connect as a team and do far more as a collective. In a franchise like yours, what is, how do you think about that center of gravity? Is it the legacy of the team? Is it the talent of the player? How do you think about that?

SAM: Yeah, that's a great, great question. We think about it a lot. I do think, like, probably a lot like your world, it is absolutely the people in the front office, in the ballpark, you know, the day of game ballpark workers, the individuals who take tickets, the security, the ushers, the grounds crew, the parking lot attendance, because the frontline of Fenway Park, they are the individuals that represent and create the either very good, warm, friendly feeling towards our customers and our players. And our players' families and the visiting players, the media that comes in, the visiting media. So, the experience that you have at Fenway Park is driven 100% by the people. So, I think the people are our center of gravity.

Just to expand on that a little bit beyond that, it absolutely is the ballpark. And this ballpark, Fenway Park, being an urban venue, right in the heart of the city, literally stitched together between five city streets. You know, it has the most unique geometry, and when the city planners, came up with the location in the Fenway, it was across the street from the Back Bay, which was landfill and a former swamp area in the city of Boston, and they chose it for its urban location. And what's happened, as you know, over the decades is Boston has really grown up as a city and now the Longwood Medical Area is right down the street, but the ballpark is right in the heart of the city.

And as you approach it on foot, you can actually feel the energy building as you approach Fenway, and it doesn't matter what gate you walk into, and to think that your mom or your grandma or your dad, grandfather, may have been there before, you know, Babe Ruth played there - it really is special.

And we've made a lot of bad decisions in our 20 years, but probably the best decision we've made was to preserve, protect, enhance, expand Fenway, because it represents a huge competitive advantage. So, if I had to pick two answers to your questions for the center of gravity, you know, clearly the day of game that the frontline workers at Fenway, but the ballpark itself pulls people in, not just from New England, but really from around the country and around the world. And we have that as an advantage that other sports teams don't have - to have a venue with that much history, tradition, is really, really powerful.

STAN: Wow, Sam, that's an amazing answer. I hope people listen to it. The Fenway Park, when I lived up in Boston, my wife, Annie, who's not a big baseball fan, loved going to Fenway Park, you know, because I'd buy her sausage dogs and all that, but she just loved the ambiance of it is as we all do.

But I really want to come to something even more thoughtful that you said. When Chris asked you the center of gravity of the team, you started with sort of a... an unexpected answer. You talked about the frontline, the people who collect tickets, the ushers and things like that. In special operations, we used to have this sort of a hierarchical pyramid. And the idea was the people you saw on TV and movies, the barrel-chested bearded commando was the star, but our bosses very thoughtfully said those operations only occur because the intelligence collected, the communications background is aired, the logistics is done, the helicopters are flown.

And there used to be a saying that said, "your importance to the mission is not determined by your proximity to the target." And, and it really was important to the culture. And I think that you've nailed it there. I want to pivot just a bit because we're at a special time right now, you're in Florida and the name of this podcast is "No Turning Back" and it's about to be spring and every spring, baseball starts anew. Everything you did last year doesn't matter. What you do next year does. But also, what I would argue, this is a unique year because we as a nation and a world are struggling and are emerging from COVID-19, and you are emerging into hopefully a better environment for all of us, for the team.

So how is this spring training different? How are you approaching this particular time?

SAM: Well, it's a great question - and one that many leaders and many businesses and industries are tackling. We decided in December, that 2021 was going to be a year of hope, of healing, and of recovery. Whether or not the virus took a different trajectory, got worse, got better, we decided affirmatively, very deliberately, that we were going to focus on those three things: hope, healing and recovery. Because if we don't, frankly, we were very worried about a 24-month impact on our [organization], a 36-month impact. I think we all question the response to COVID by government officials, different states, federal government. We can't control that. But what we can control is our own mindset internally at the Boston Red Sox. And we needed to pivot. We must pivot from this period of fear, anxiety, despair, hurt.

You know, look, we went through, uh, like again, people have been through much, much more difficult things. It's all relative, but in our little world, you know, we suffered layoffs, furloughs, pay cuts across the entire organization. We only staged 37.5% percent of our season, played 60 games. Probably many of our fans wish we didn't play any of those games because it was a terrible year on the field. But we've just sort of said, we're going to deliberately change how we operate, how we look at COVID, and how we go forward.

And it really started by bringing Alex Cora back, who was our field manager, who went through a very difficult period. He was suspended by Major League Baseball for his role in a cheating

scandal in 2017. It was a risky move, bringing back someone who had been suspended, but we felt it was important.

He is so, so talented and gifted and an important part of our leadership group. He acknowledged that mistake and bringing him back after he served his long penalty, I think was really the first step, in terms of bringing our group back together. Major League Baseball has done a great job of putting COVID protocols in place where we can actually operate. And so, we're, we have this mindset, but we are still working for the most part remotely, and as we get into next week and in Florida, we will welcome fans here back in a limited basis. I will tell you, I will have tears in my eyes seeing that first fan come through the gate because it will represent this sort of hope and healing.

So, we're not there and all of 2021 is going to be difficult to be sure. But we have to pivot our mindset and we have to pivot towards coming together and emerging from what has been the darkest period for sure, in my 20 years here. And I think it has to be done deliberately and intentionally, because it won't just happen. We need to make it happen as a leadership group and as a team.

STAN: Absolutely.

CHRIS: Sam, let's build on that because it's an important... I think it's an important and deeper point beyond just your franchise, society wide. Going back a year, having served in some difficult places around the world, Stan and I and other friends started talking about the, you know, beyond the realities of COVID, what this is going to require is this sense of social isolation and distancing which could lead to a fraying of the social fabric because we're losing the connectivity that we take for granted.

And we've been to places where that is an enforced way of living and it leads to really bad things, right? People need to connect with networks outside of their own immediate circles in order for a social fabric to stay stable. You know, there's a sort of an underpinning of the social contract more broadly.

And watching what has happened to sports has been difficult for those outside to see, you know, this is such a cornerstone of who we are as a society. What do you, I mean, you've been in the industry for your whole life, your adult life. You're a subject matter expert. What role do you think sports plays in that foundation is who we are as a nation?

SAM: Well, it's so interesting to hear you speak about some of the places you've been around the world - where I can only imagine what those places are like, but the isolation and the distancing and it is so apropos of what we're all trying to do as a society. And I couldn't agree more that it will have impacts and effects far beyond 2021 and vaccine distribution and people, you know, going back to school and going back to work.

We don't know the impacts. You probably know the impacts better than we do because you've seen it firsthand in other societies. In our little world in professional sports, I think we have the

very unique opportunity to play an important role in getting people back together. By definition, we are a public gathering place and space. Some people refer to Fenway Park as a cathedral, you know, like a church, people coming together to celebrate and share common experiences. So, we are hopeful that we will have the opportunity to welcome fans back on April 1st for opening day. If we're given that opportunity, it will obviously be a limited crowd with distance between people, but that will be the first step down here in Florida.

We will be doing that next week. I would say it shows you the difference between government and Florida and government in Massachusetts. There's just different approach to the response. But we are hardwired, I believe, as human beings to gather in public, to get together the social contract that you talked about, the fabric of connectivity, and this has been really painful for lots and lots of people and damaging and dangerous. So, with sports, we provide a venue for people to get back together in a place that they, we will make sure they know is safe and a place they can come even while the pandemic still is raging.

Number two, we have as an industry an amazing platform for messaging, great social media following, television network, radio network, players that can deliver messages. So, we have a role to play with respect to recovery, whether it's promoting the safety and efficacy of the vaccine, or how to reenter into society, either your workplace or your school or your ballpark. We have a very loud voice and the sports industry, generally, all of the league commissioners, team presidents, general managers, managers, have a responsibility. What makes it tricky in, you know, especially given the last four or five years that we've lived through, is there, hasn't been a consistent message to deliver to our 330 million people in the United States and that's difficult.

So, we want to be sure that we deliver a consistent message here in New England, at least to our six states to make sure we're a part of this recovery as we go forward. And I very much see the Red Sox as being willing and able to participate in that recovery so we can avoid the bad things that you referenced that come from the social distancing, the isolation, you know, you read about, you know, torture being deployed to, you know, keeping people isolated right, and away. And you think about how damaging, that is. And, and in some ways, you know, that's what's happened because of this, this virus, it's almost it's unthinkable. If you had told me one year ago today that we'd be responding to something that could create that type of environment.

It's just unthinkable that a global pandemic, could come in and, and create this environment.

And we're all doing our best to navigate through it, but it's really, really hard and only with great teamwork are we gonna pull out of it?

STAN: Wow. Sam, I'm going to wrap this up - start by thanking you. You're incredibly generous with your time and your wisdom, but also just to sort of tie together what you said.

You know, we just had a more than 30-minute conversation and we never talked about the tactics of baseball. We didn't talk about balls and strikes or right-handers or left-handers or singles or doubles. What we talked about was where baseball fits in society. And then where the

participants in baseball, the stewardship that they have, a sacred mission because baseball does mean something to all of us.

It's a little different, but it's also unifying. We all, when we talk about baseball and we go to a game together, there's a common denominator. That is just very, very important. And so, you know, that's leadership. You know, when we talk about leadership, it ain't always winning and losing on the field.

Sometimes it's taking your place in society where it needs you to be.

SAM: Well, it is a sacred mission because it is an institution, it's a social institution, you know, so it really, the integrity of the game is so important. And, it is a great unifying force and we need to celebrate that probably more and now than ever given what we're all dealing with.

STAN: So, let me wind up by thanking you and saying that Chris and I promise not to criticize from the cheap seats, as long as you win 150 or so games, we'll be good with it.

SAM: That sounds good to be. We we'd sign up for that right now.

CHRIS: Sam, such a great discussion. Thank you for the time. And thanks for your leadership.

STAN: Take care of my friend.

SAM: Thank you guys.

CHRIS: So, great discussion with Sam there. I have never... that's the first time that I had... in prep for this, the first time I'd met with Sam. I know you spent more time with him as you talk about in the podcast, all the way down to walk in the outfield with him.

Just a really, really thoughtful, non-stereotypical leader and human being the way he described sports, the Red Sox as an organization, his role there. The one thing that jumped out to me immediately was his description of the center of gravity. Like what makes that institution work? And I expected him to go directly to start at the players. Are we winning or losing? Are the players playing well, et cetera, and building out from there? I don't think he even mentioned players in his description.

STAN: No, he didn't get there. And that was what was so amazing - because I expected, you know, you go back for years, talk David Ortiz or something.

And instead, he talked about the people who make the simple things happen, that really aren't simple. The people who maintain the field, the people who prepare the stadium for fans to come in, the people who do all those necessary - we're going to call them in the COVID era essential - jobs. And he described them not only as key to making it happen, but also key to the culture of the Red Sox.

CHRIS: It reminded... I learned this from you and your other senior leaders when I was working underneath you in the military. Being in an operations role one point in one of the theaters and, you know, forces moving all over the place. And we had a young group of sort of engineer folks that were... one of their side jobs, two or three people, junior folks, not operators, was to prep vehicles to and from the landing field for the units coming and going.

And there had been some glitches there. My normal bias would have been to just, you know put an angry, senior enlisted person, have them go yell at them or whatever, and having watched the way that the organization had shifted its thinking to that idea that your proximity to the target doesn't define your importance of the mission, as you mentioned to Sam. I walked, took a few minutes to walk this small corral to the airfield at a quiet time and said, look, let me walk you through how all this works. Here's where the helicopters land. When they land, operators are getting off, and here's the types of things that they have on them and this is in their heads.

And there's a timestamp on that. And they've got to get to here. We went back to the op center and kind of walked him through how the intelligence folks work, et cetera, and where it goes around the globe. It took maybe 45 minutes and I mean it was a learned skill that I had learned from others.

They saw themselves as part of the mission in a way. You could see the lights gone in a way they never had before. And of course, there was never, there was never another problem. You know, the next morning they're out there polishing the vehicles to get ready because now they had this connection to how important, what might seem like a menial task, like taking tickets at the front of the stadium.

Suddenly they recognized that they were part of this much bigger system and just as critical as anyone getting on and off those helicopters. So, it was really interesting to me to hear another leader talk about it through the same lens.

STAN: Well, it's funny - because you had learned it, you know, what was important to our organization, and then if we expand that, we talked a little bit about what was important about the Boston Red Sox. Sort of "so what?" because they're a sports team and they obviously want to win baseball games. But remember when he talked, how they fit into the city?

CHRIS: Yep. Yeah, just the cultural heritage, importance. It was impressive to hear him, because you asked him that sort of fishbowl point. Like everyone, all his neighbors know what your role is, and he takes, clearly, takes that role very seriously. [He] is able to deal with the pressure in a way that I find very impressive, but more importantly, seized that institution that he's the CEO of as part of the cultural fabric of that city. And so, you know, I think it's going to be really interesting and probably an awakening for us as a nation, as sports start to come back. I know as someone who is not a big, I don't tune into a lot of sports, not that's good or bad, but I will have a whole different appreciation for how important teams and professional sports are as part of our social fabric on the backside of this year.

STAN: That's right. When we were working with Boston this last spring during the COVID crisis, I remember we talked about the stakeholders in the city and the first thing you think is police department, fire department, and things like that.

And then you realize the number of universities in greater Boston, the number of hospitals, the number of nonprofits, and then the number of essential businesses. And I'm going to, it was funny when Sam described the Red Sox as being in the "toy department of life." But I would argue they're almost an essential organ in the life of Boston.

And so, when we watched Mayor Walsh, latch all these different entities into a living organism to deal with COVID-19, the Red Sox were part of it. And as you know, they've been giving inoculations there and whatnot. So that was a very interesting window.

CHRIS: Yeah. A really good, good point. And the, you know, the pressure that... I expected him to talk about the pressure in a totally different way. Because of that, you know, we've all seen the movie where the coach has the, you know, garbage thrown in the lawn after they lose the game or whatever. And there was none of that. And he was just grateful to be in that position, which was really impressive.

The other point that jumped out at me, one last one to throw out was the... when we talked to them about who leads that the Red Sox, you know, is it the managers, the CEO, is that the player on the field, et cetera? And you know, his answer was great, but it does speak to the similarity in any complex organization. You can walk into a headquarters in a special operations unit and at any given moment, three different people are kind of in charge.

Right. And the really good units and teams understand how to pass that hat around according. And sometimes it happens multiple times and within 10 minutes. Right. And it sounded like a similar dynamic that he runs as well.

STAN: Yeah. It's not always who's hitting the most home runs. It's who gives those sometimes intangible connections in an organization who gives purpose, who gives focus to an organization. And so, and I think he understands that all the different pieces of the Red Sox are part of that - to include Fenway Park. The very physical thing I think has an impact on players as well as on fans and as well as on the city. And so, he thinks of himself and themselves as stewards of a responsibility.

CHRIS: Yeah, we didn't talk about it with Sam, but it did get my wheels turning. And I'm curious if it did you as well. And for those folks that listen to our podcasts that have a background in the military or spent time there, did you ever think about, and maybe you could describe it briefly, but the headquarters that you established in Balad, Iraq through a similar lens? All be it for a brief period, relatively speaking. But it had a similar feel for the organization.

STAN: It really did. It was sort of the physical manifestation of what we were trying to do. It was in an old Iraqi aircraft bunker, which you'll remember. And in this big open area, we had all the different players operating on a constant basis and it was a geographical point, but it was also

an emotional connection. People would describe Balad and they would be talking not just about the physical place, but about what about what happened there. It was very strange after we left that headquarters and moved to another, I went back a few months later and it was as though Martians come and taken everybody away and it was, it was completely empty. Nobody occupied it.

And I was having one of those moments where you walk back in the memories of all we did together there, the energy that the good times and the, and the really tough times just sort of flood around you. Because the place holds that, that magic.

CHRIS: Yeah. It would be a whole another, separate, but really interesting discussion with someone like Sam, the ability to see in those, in that infrastructure.

And some of this, you know, as we go back to a physical workspace, I think there's going to be a re-appreciation of how important that is. The, you know, the headquarters that you described was... certainly had the resources and what not to make it as cleaned up and pretty as you'd want it to, but it was rough sort of by design.

And he walked in, it was this big, huge sort of darkened open area, wires hanging everywhere, but just this frenetic energy and sort of positive attitude, which really drove sort of a cultural feel. And yet when there was the transition over to different headquarters, there was sort of a collective reflection on how everybody missed that specific infrastructure spot, even though most people that haven't been into a combat zone, wouldn't think that that's that important, but it really was this strange sort of lifeblood.

And it was interesting to hear Sam sort of describe similar.

STAN: Absolutely. Extraordinary leader.

CHRIS: It was a great discussion - he's doing fantastic things, will continue to. He's done an incredible amount and his time with the Red Sox. And we really appreciate him and his team giving us the time.