Susan O'Malley: Um, I think that the, the missing superpower here of so many, um, leadership teams and companies is actually this intentionality around process, right? And the power of this really amazing orchestrated, uh, processes and structures that, that are fit for the modern world, right? Versus relics and stuff from, you know, 20, 50, 100 years ago.

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

Over the next several weeks, Stan and I will be embarking on a new mini-series called Demystifying DEI, where we will look at how organizations are approaching important work of diversity, equity, and inclusion. In this series, we're excited to hear how industrial leaders have authentically incorporated diversity, equity, and inclusion principles into their organizations, and how they're investing in their people to drive change, and the lessons they have learned through curiosity and trial.

Danielle Tenconi: This week, we continue our Demystifying DEI miniseries, with the conversation Stan and Chris had with Susan O'Malley. Susan serves as the Head of Strategy for Personalized Medicine at Genentech. In this role, she brings together creative leadership with decision-making and long-term future's thinking. Prior, she spent almost a decade at the design and innovation firm, IDEO, and began the first chapter of her career at Google.

In this fascinating discussion, Stan and Chris dive deep into the journey of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and why this is the grand challenge of our time. They explore why equity can be a stopping point for leaders, and how leaders can be more inclusive. This conversation unpacks how to develop diverse teams, sharing the five dynamics as a powerful tool for balanced teams.

Susan shares the importance of authenticity in our relationships. How being intentional with process is critical, and why different perspectives are key for effective collaboration. We were enthralled by the wealth of insights Susan shared, and will include the resources she referenced in the show notes. Thank you to Susan for taking the time to talk to us. Now, over to the discussion.

Stan McChrystal: Well, Susan, thanks so much for being on. And we've known each other a while, and I'm a huge admirer of yours. And I'm also envious of the breadth of your experience, what you've seen and touched, and have been a part of.

And I'm gonna ask an old white guy question. You know, I, I started a business at age 55. And so, what is DEI? I mean, if someone says DEI and guys like me say, "Well, we need some. Go buy six gallons of it, and so we'll have enough DEI." So we're trying to demystify it. What is it? How do we get there? How do we think about it?

Susan O'Malley: Yeah, absolutely. I, I love that you're starting with this, 'cause it's such a great level setting, open, inviting question, right? Which I think we need to do all the time when we're dealing with complex stuff. And so I'm gonna suggest a couple of definitions that work for me. Uh, and I think we'll, we'll have great references and books that'll probably go in the show notes that we can point people towards.

So, uh, so let me just put some definitions out there on the table that, that we can use, you know? Diversity is what it starts with. And often, these days, people mean, uh, demographic diversity, diversity that represents the communities and countries, and places where we work and live. And I think as you've written in your books, that's a fantastic starting point, but it's not, uh, it's not the whole, the whole bo- bottle by any extent.

And so keeping that one really simple and straightforward, uh, you know, many of the companies we've worked in, or I've worked in, do not represent the, the communities and countries in which they live, nor do they have enough of a global perspective. So would hope that one is a little bit less controversial, and there's, there's, there's nuance there for sure.

I'll go next to inclusion, though, because I think it's super important that we, we build on diversity with that, which is that, you know, it became apparent in, in recent decades that getting those people inside the door and having them in the company is, is not useful if they're not able to participate meaningfully, uh, if we tokenize them, if we don't sort of really invite them to, to be at the table and, and, and have their voices heard and raised.

And I think the nuance for me here that's really important is that that doesn't just mean learning all the ways, and norms, and all the fun cultural references, and all the short hands that any of us might have in a, in a company, if it's been historically white. We often, uh, we often put the burden on folks from different backgrounds to come in and, you know, go to the happy hour at the sports bar, or go on the company ski trip, or do things where maybe we might not even be aware that this is a really, uh, pre- predominantly white historic, uh, capitalist norm, right? Which may have service for a long time, but maybe needs to be, to be questioned.

Um, and then I'll go to equity, and then maybe we can come back to inclusion, 'cause there's a cool framework I wanna throw mix. You know, on the equity side, I think the big idea there is, you know, it's, it's equity, right? It intentionally has no L. We're not talking about equality. And the point there is that, increasingly, uh, the people that we're going to be in the room with are coming from radically different starting points.

And so the things that may help and may be useful that we may need to do may not look equal or fair on paper. Because those starting points are so different, we need to, to catch folks up and maybe enable them to help them to be successful in their, in their own way. And so I think particularly since the events of George Floyd and spring 2020, it's equity that I hear a lot more dialogue about in terms of targeting equity and what does, does equity mean? And that can be a big stopping point for a lot of leaders, uh, and a lot of folks who are newer to the topic.

Um, two quick ones, and then we'll go, go back to you guys. One is, um, really interesting work by Francis Fry, who I'm sure you guys know out of Harvard Business School. And in her book with, uh, her wife, Ann Morris, Unleashed, they talk about the inclusion dial. And Francis, in her research, actually recommends starting with inclusion because she believes that there's some really interesting stuff that can happen when we look at folks inside of the company who may have outsider status, who can extend that inclusion to others. And so she has a kind of a really cool paradigm where she talks about the inclusion dial, um, and, and, and what that can do.

Um, and the last one, and I'll just put this out there really quickly, um, there's also another great author whose work I highly recommend called Jennifer Brown, who wrote a really pioneering book called How to be an Inclusive Leader. And she talks about four stages, and the four stages where a person might be at, everything from

unaware to aware, through to action, and then to see where we might be really all in and committed to this.

And so it's been helpful for me, as I've moved around different companies and different rooms, to think, "Where am I in this room? And, and who else is in the room? And, and where are we trying to go in this, in this moment?

Chris Fussell: Um, yeah, that... Great references and, and a great breakdown, Susan. Um, I love simple analogies. Um, and one of our [laughs] guests we had on recently, um, who's founded and, and is the executive at a, at an organization called Yardstick that we, we do some work with, um-

Susan O'Malley: Great.

Chris Fussell: ... Ebbie Parsons. And, and they, uh... he, he uses this great analogy that says DEI... And I'm curious how you react to this, um, or if you used anything similar. He said, "Ima- it's like a, a, a dance party. 'Cause diversity is who you invite. Uh, inclusion is, do you get asked to dance? And equity is how much space you get on a dance floor."

Susan O'Malley: Yeah. [laughs].

Chris Fussell: Which I think is like a great, simple breakdown for someone like me to go, "Okay, that... I can frame that out. I can build on that." Makes sense to you?

Susan O'Malley: Ab- absolutely. I love it. I've heard, I've heard maybe that exact one before, or, or different references. And I think any... Look, part of what we'll talk about is the journey we're all on here, and anything is helpful that we can hook onto and, and come back to. And, and, uh, I, I, I love those mental pictures. I think they're really compelling and, and straightforward, as you say.

Chris Fussell: Can, can you offer some personal perspective on this 'cause you've seen it from different angles? Um, your, uh, your, your immigrant background into, into the United States, which you can talk about as- if, if you want to. Um, your, your personal perspective on all of this. And, and you've worked in a lot of different organizations. Um, and so you've seen it from, from different angles. I'm curious, over your career, lessons that you've learned, how you've seen this

conversation, uh, changing, and just how your personal perspective has grown as well.

Susan O'Malley: Yeah, fantastic. There's- uh, I love this question so much, and there's a lot to unpack there. Maybe let me start in the here and now, and then we can, we can go by act to, to Google, and maybe to, to the design industry, into IDEO.

Um, the first is sort of the, the, the passion and commitment, and also the pain of the past 24 months, right? In terms of both the, the global pandemic, but also some of the events in North America, and really this moral imperative, this call to action from leaders to, to stand up and say, "Uh, are we gonna meaningfully engage with this topic? You know, where have or haven't we made progress?"

And, and so, um, for me, the, the stakes here have never felt higher. Um, and I think specifically, uh, not just, you know, tragic events that happen in a community, but increasingly things like court cases and sentencing, and we have... there's a whole afterlife of, of trauma that happens there. Um, it's, it's really become obvious to me that it's very hard to do business or be a leader, uh, without, uh, knowing how to, how to engage and how to stand for both what we stand for on a personal level, but also maybe where the organization wants to get, get with this in terms of their, their own values.

And so to me, it is along with climate, and it's obviously connected in terms of how things like equity and, and, and space and, and the environment affect people. But to me, it is the grand challenge of our time. And so I see that as a huge moral imperative. Um, I will say, though, starting back at my earlier career in, in the tech industry and when I was still in Europe, you know, I wouldn't say, regretfully, that this was on my radar as much as it should have been, right? And as I've learned more about bias and prejudice, and some of these things that can often be quite unconscious, uh, I wouldn't say that this was always something that I was super, uh, conscious of.

And, and looking back at different leaders, and different communities, and different teams I was in, actually, there was quite a lot of, um, you know, unconscious bias, or, or maybe accidental prejudice that was happening. And so, um, as I've learned more about it, I think creating the permission with a group of people, even as small as, you know, the three of us on this call, to say, uh, when we

notice something or we have a question, you know, can, can we raise our hand? Can we commit to trying to catch ourselves? And can we call each other out on it, or, or, you know, call out our senior leaders on it, if we, if we notice something happening?

So over time, it's really been a journey there. Um, you know, I think it's important, Chris, to your question though, to get it out on the table. Like, all of these industries have been on a journey with this topic, right? And, uh, you know, big tech is, big tech is an easy one to, to pick on. Obviously, it was medium tech or, or smaller tech when I worked there. It wasn't quite... it hadn't quite scaled up the way, the way it is now. Um, and there's, you know, a really important angle to this that I think we, we sometimes forget to call out, which is the, the product and business lines of these massive tech companies. You know, the, the risk of them being inherently biased in terms of both the training data and the way that customers have access to these platforms is, is, is, is really significant, right?

And I'm, I'm not an expert in AI and all that good stuff, and I'm sure you'll have people on talking about that, but that's the first angle of it. Um, but the counterpoint to that that I would throw on the table is, you know, in, in my early days in Google, we were, you know, selling AdWords. We were fixing people's accounts. We were trying to get them to understand, you know, how the tool could really help revolutionize their business. And it was actually much more of a good news story, because it was getting the mom and pop shops online. It was getting into countries where maybe, you know, the business plan didn't say go there or go here. So it was, it was actually much more of a, of an inspirational time.

But, you know, in hindsight, a lot of white early founding teams, a lot of, uh, recruiting from elite talent networks, which maybe we'll talk about later on, right? How do we think about the network in this new world? That's a really interesting one. Um, and, and some problematic, you know, practices with performance and meritocracy, right? We think the best and brightest can get ahead, but we fail to acknowledge who gets the opportunity to, to come into the conversation. And so there's a lot there to, to, to unpack.

Chris Fussell: Can, um... we can... we'll spend on time on each of those. Um, but I'm curious, you spent, you know, years at IDEO, which you can talk a little bit about their- the focus of that organization, perhaps, um, for, for anyone that wouldn't be familiar with it. But as a, a design thinking organization, um, lessons

there, or evolution you saw there. I mean, I, I imagine there's, there's deep thinking on design practices associated with this conversation as, as well. Um, but I'm well over my skis. I just assume it's happening, but like what, what does that look like in a, in a physical space or design-thinking space?

Susan O'Malley: Yeah, absolutely. Um, and the part of this I've been closest to was a couple of years when I was, uh, leading a little team that did a thing called talent design, where it was effectively thinking about the management systems and the ways of working inside a company, and, and how they attract talent and promote talent, and, and recruit. And so I can speak more to that in a minute.

Um, you know, I think, you know, IDEO is a company that prides itself on being in- inherently human centered, right? It's one of the, uh, iconic companies that, that put design thinking on the map. And so, um, there, there's some, some really interesting stuff there in terms of the, the origins of the company, um, the focus on interdisciplinary teams. So I know we might speak a little bit later on on, uh, different, you know, different types of cognitive styles and, and different modalities of thought.

And so inherently, you know, at the core of the ideal process is the idea that we can all be designers, but, you know, I might come from a customer service background, or you might have been a doctor or a, a carpenter, or a farmer, and, and maybe you've ended up in this design space to help us. And we have a common process and methodology that helps us, uh, helps us create together.

Um, I will say, though, that the design sector and not just IDEO, and, and very similar to tech, has historically been, you know, a very white space. And so the, the progress that was made in the decades since the founding of those companies is maybe not as, as fast as it should be. Um, but I believe that these firms are making a real commitment and trying very hard to, uh, you know, make significant progress, you know, on a quick timeframe, but also do it in a really meaningful way that stands up to the imperative of our, of our time.

Stan McChrystal: Susan, I think the design question is really interesting. You, you may or may not know, but we get what we designed. And in 1940, the United States government knew it needed a new building for the defense department. And so they designed the Pentagon, that iconic structure now, and many people put a lot of reasons to why it's got five sides. In reality, it was designed to fit a piece of

ground that was right across Memorial Bridge from D.C., and then they moved it. But they'd already done the design, so they kept the five-sided building and they put it in a spot, a mile or so away.

But the interesting thing about it, or almost sadly interesting is, was built in 1940. It started in 1940 in Virginia. And so when you walk there now, one of the great deals is there are bathrooms everywhere. You walk outta your office, it's such a short walk to a restroom, and you go, "Wow, these people were really thoughtful." Well, in reality, because it was 1940s, Virginia, they had to put twice as many restrooms as you needed because they had to have separate for, in those days called colored and white. President Roosevelt was just absolutely furious when he heard about it, but it was a state requirement.

So we design things, and then we live with them. The United States was designed with a constitution into a republic, and it had certain expectations about only white males could vote. And of course, it took a lot of design changes over the years. So what I'm gonna ask you to do is take that design idea and expand it. Suppose you are in an organization now, and you are trying to design in DEI, so make it so, as much as possible, it is, uh, built into the concept of the organization.

Susan O'Malley: It's a fascinating story. And I thank you for sharing that, Stan. And I've, I've had the fortune to walk through the Pentagon, although not... I didn't, didn't pick up on that, on that nuance.

Um, the first thing I'll say is, you know, the, uh... a lot of design is about... at the superficial level, it's about how stuff looks, or what it... you know, how it comes across. And, you know, elegance, beauty, all these, these, these qualities sometimes is the most kind of basic thing a lot of people associate it with. But as you're getting at it, it's much more about how things work, right? That's the... that's really what- when, you know, it works well, is thoughtful, is, is doing its job in an incredible way. Um, so I wanna put that on the table.

The first thing that jumps out from you in your story, though, is not about creation, it's actually about history and the past, right? And understanding the context in which something came, and, and acknowledging that, and being able to wrap your head around it and saying, so the history of the building, there's a path dependency. Maybe there's, there's things, you know, historically, that we have to wrap our heads around. Um, but even just understanding what's there, what's either in the

structure or in the DNA. And think about corporate DNA for a second, right? That's an interesting one with, with, with culture.

So what is there that we may, we may build from, we may understand, we may look at it in a new light? What is the raw material we have? But if there is a, a problematic history or something else going on, that we have to acknowledge, you know, having the courage to put that out on the table and, and unpack it with the right level of, of resolution.

Um, the next place I would go to, Stan, is the idea of having, uh, representation, right? That is diverse demographically, racially. Maybe it's got gender, neurodiversity, all these different types of things in the mix, right? If it's an inherently, um, uh, diverse group, we're going to just bet- get a better outcome. And I know we'll talk a little bit about your Risk book in a moment. There's some really great examples there that we can draw upon for some, some non-obvious proof points on, on why diverse team, team really matters.

So assuming we can acknowledge the history, we can look at the raw material, and we can, we can acknowledge the team, the next thing I would say is the question we ask, right? Like, what, what are we really going to do? What is the central question that we're designing around? And once we've got that in on the table, probably where I would go next... and this is sort of the last part for now... it's actually getting a bit more radical about the outcome.

And, and the phrase I love to use here is what I call glimpses from the future, right? Which we sometimes in the design world, looking at, um, you know, vignettes in the future, right? And the future could be George Orwell, or it could be Juul Verne, right? It could be, you know, radically different versions of the future. And actually getting, uh, both the leaders of this process and the stakeholders and communities that are gonna be part of it deeply engage in a visioning process, because it's very difficult to not act or not get excited if you've had those, uh, glimpses from the future. You can't unsee them.

And then, you know, I'll pause for a sec. From there, it gets very complicated. There's multiple avenues, multiple paths. It's, it's sort of like designing a team of teams, or something, in terms of exactly, you know, where you go next. But I, I do think that the power of vision, and storytelling, and futuring is, is under, um,

underappreciated sometimes when we're trying to rally around a challenge like that.

Chris Fussell: So since you- you're, you're forecasting out, um, we'd love to get a little, little more thoughts on the methodology there, because, um, you know, S- S- Stan and I, in our, in our own back and forth dialogue, and then talking to leaders, really trying to think through, uh, people generally get this, right? There's some clarity around the language, like tell exactly what we're meaning, what, what it all means.

But, um, that this is directionally correct. You know, that's not the argument. It's how do we, how do we get there? So we'd love to hear, hear what you're thinking on sort of the visioning and design process, um, but just for, for fun. Or it maybe something you thought about, I'm sure you've thought about it, maybe done some work on forecast out to whatever point where things like the Metaverse, or whatever version of that, starts to become more of a reality.

What impact... There's an upside and a downside to any big shift like that. There- there's one school that would say, "Well, that can kind of solve for it, right?" When it's- you're- you can represent whomever in that space, but there's gotta be a downside, right? It's gonna get hacked. And there's- there- there'll be negatives to it. Um, any, any thinking there on how you think that's going to, to impact?

Susan O'Malley: Yeah, for sure. And I'll, um... Let me try and sort of get, get, get into this mail stream 'cause it's a, it's a really powerful question. The first thing I would say is, you know, um, one of the ways that I built, built teams at IDEO and, and, and building them now, my new role is, um, there's a methodology that actually looks at the kind of, um, the default path for human beings energy. So bear with me for a second, but there's a really amazing system called Five Dynamics. Maybe you've heard of it.

And, you know, we all know these tools and I know McChrystal Group has some powerful tools too. But essentially, why this one is great for design is it's got five elements, the fifth is the integrative element. And it's about whether or not my default as a person is exploring, you know, daydreaming, conjuring, thinking really love that new ideas, new ideas space, comfortable can stay there all day.

The second one is about excitement, right? It's called excite. It's about relationships. It's about communicating. Bu- you know, often leaders building that bridge, getting people on board with the narrative, the story, really getting people fired up and understanding what's happening.

The third one, which typically in a design context, we underestimate, even though it's really powerful, is what's called examine. And it's about rigor, and analysis, and reduction, and really breaking things down. And, you know, being a little bit of a hard, little, little, uh... you know, being, being a little bit of a hard character. Pardon my language. But, you know, we all know this person, right? They're not... I'm, I'm not that person, just to be clear.

Uh, and the last one is the execute, right? Which is the joy of getting stuff done, moving things, feeling momentum, f- feeling flow. You know, sometimes you want it done yesterday versus tomorrow. And the reason I mentioned this to your question, Chris, is, uh, in tackling a complicated project like that, one of the most important things I've learned in, in a decade in the space is you need a balanced team with that energy, right? It doesn't matter how junior or senior people are. Um, that's the price of entry to getting a team off the ground.

Because if we have too much of any one thing, we're actually not gonna be able to make progress on an, on an integrated solution. So assuming we could build a balanced team, um, we'd probably start, you know, bringing people through a visioning activity. Um, the other next thing that I would naturally do is something like a systems map, where we would essentially kind of map out all the key components, maybe the external context, um, some of the actors, you know, they could be different organizations, nonprofit stakeholders, and, and really build a picture of the world that we're seeing.

And there's a great quote on this, which I think is really helpful, which is, uh, this phrase, "Sense making is political," right? So a lot of people are gonna need to touch that map and touch that picture in order to be happy with it. And that picture might be old by tomorrow or by next week, or by six months, as we start to change the system. But in order for a team to move through a really complex problem space, we have to sort of agree on a version of the truth, even if it's just a snapshot at a moment in time.

And from there, we would go into prototyping, uh, you know, taking bits of the idea, deconstructing them, bringing them backwards, and trying to figure out how to make progress on them. And I know you guys have had, um, some other ideal leaders on the podcast before talking about prototyping. The key thing with a prototype is not every prototype is a smaller version of the final thing, right? Different prototypes might have different learning intention. Um, they might have different angles on it. And so building almost like a fusion cell around different, different angles of the prototype, uh, is another way that I would make progress really, really quickly.

Stan McChrystal: Susan, this is fascinating. Let me pull on the diversity reality a bit. You know, one of the things we found in the army, for example, is you could have a room full of army colonels that is diverse in terms of gender and race, and even branches of the military. But at the end of the day, the most powerful thing was they were army colonels. They'd spent 20 years in the army. And so the diversity was pretty limited because they had had that shared experience for so long.

And I think that might be true of Google executives after a certain number of years and whatnot. So how do you ensure that you have actual diversity in the room, you know, as opposed to sort of cosmetic diversity?

Susan O'Malley: Absolutely. Um, you know, I think this is such a powerful, um, question, and I think it's, you know... there's, there's rooms that we're in where we... the controls are known to us and the levers, like the hiring or the invite. But actually, I think nowadays it's, it's particularly interesting to think about your question in the context of networks, non- non-traditional organizations, you know, different types of people that might be working with you who maybe aren't a full-time employee, um, or a customer, or a partner.

So, so that's the first, um, the first thing I would say, Stan, is, you know, you need to think about, um, how can you have sort of authentic peer relationships? And I say peer raced because it's not necessarily always just, uh, sponsorship or charity, right? I think sometimes when we realize, "Oh, my God, I'm too insular. Uh, I need to go out and make friends." [laughs] And then, you know, the friends who might have been in your, you know, in your little musical group or your church, or your community, or at the softball game, like they're kind of saying, "Well, well, that's

awkward, [laughs] suddenly you're coming over inviting me, uh, into this thing where you haven't re- really given me the time of day, right?"

So I think, um, the first thing is just that you- it- we have to take action and make an effort, but it will take time to build the kinds of relationships that we need, um, to have access to the different types of perspectives that we, uh, that we, that we want. So, so that's the first one.

Um, the second one is really being intentional about... And, and you actually talk about this in the book Risk. I think you've got a really nice example of two different boards, right? You have a, you have a banking board, and then you have the Thanos board [laughs], and, and you sort of... you, you know, you show both sides of the same example, which is, um, you know, there might be traditional things that are obvious that we need, that we need from a certain perspective, but people are more textured and nuanced, right? People have a context.

And so they might have a certain identity. Like they look like X, Y, Z, but actually when you really, you know, come to know them and have a chance to speak to them, there's a whole context around them in terms of their home life, their, their gender identity, their sexual orientation, you know, whether or not they are religious or not, whether or not they, they like sports, right? You know, pick any number of variables here.

And I think that it really takes time, and effort, and commitment to understand the context that a person brings. And particularly, when you're recruiting, you know, for the most part, as you get to know someone, if you're, if you're getting to the point where you're kind of agreeing an offer or a package nowadays, they will... this is something that they will want you to understand in terms of what, what they are believing will be true in your organization when they work with you. So you kind of need to think about it like you're recruiting the whole person, um, and not just the, the, the resume on paper.

Um, so that's one thought there. I mean, there's some other stuff, Stan, that I'm sure you've seen that I really love. And, and there's a fantastic reference here that I can give you guys, but, uh, Tim Harford, who you probably know, he's a great writer and broadcaster, and he's a- a- an academic in Oxford. And he has a great column in the Financial Times. And he- in his book, Messy, which is a totally underrated business book, one of the top, you know, it's a bit like Team of Teams or One

Mission, right? It's one of these gifts you just... books I keep giving people a gift. And if they haven't heard it, it's- you know, you know, you know it's gonna blow their mind.

Um, but Tim has a whole chapter in there in collaboration, and he hits on three of the big famous case studies about outsider thinking, right? He actually does the, the Bay of Pig's, uh, story and talks about the origins of groupthink. Um, he has another fantastic story about kind of the power of an outsider, right? And so he cite the us, uh, work of Maggie Neale, going back decades, about students doing a murder mystery game, and how even bringing in one person who brings difference to the group forces the group to communicate more clearly, articulate their thinking.

You know, just any kind of accidental short hands or sloppiness that might happen 'cause we all know each other suddenly goes out the door. And the- and, you know, the data on how great this group will get at solving the puzzle just goes through the, through the roof.

Um, and then the other one that he cites is, is a- some work by Scott Page, about the performance culture industries in sports and media, and how, you know, if you're a top tennis seed, uh, adding a nutritionist, or a psychologist or a, a culture designer to your team, right, is gonna be massively more beneficial than the third tennis coach or the fourth tennis coach, right? They're probably just gonna end up fighting with each other, but it's actually that sort of, uh, really, uh, nuanced perspective that, that, that is gonna help you sort of get to the, the next level.

And, and this has been validated in investing clubs in the stock market, that the, the power of difference will up the performance of the whole group. Um, I do wanna caveat this, though, and say that in a lot of these studies, historically, there's been one outsider, you know, one person added to a team or one different perspective. And, you know, I think nowadays, that doesn't cut it, right? We know that when we're bringing in, uh, different perspectives to an organization, often, you know, we need more than one person, right? We need entire groups or, or buddies, or cohorts.

And so I just wanna caveat the research by saying that it's not, it's not literally one person, even though that was the context of this work in the, in the '80s and '90s.

So Messy by Tim Harford, would, would highly recommend that chapter on co-collaboration.

Stan McChrystal: Yeah. I mean that, that's brilliant. Um, if I could a little personal, 'cause you described a couple of the board of directors' experiences, one my own, and then the other we described for Thanos. But one things I did find is, if you have an outsider on a board, that person can be isolated pretty easily and, and sort of ignored or shut it down. If you have more than one, then, typically, you have a little bit more critical mass, and you can establish group norms where that person can communicate effectively.

On the other hand, you don't ha- wanna have everybody on the board with no clue what that industry is, because then you've got a set of [inaudible 00:29:12] that's like me, and they're just kind of sitting there. So those kinds of things have to be designed. Just, like, ideal designing a board, or designing any group that's gonna do a difficult thing, I think should be carefully constructed.

Chris and I have often talked about maybe a person running for high office like the presidency shouldn't be an individual. Maybe they should literally get on a stage and say, "I'm running for this office, and these are the 10 people who would have key jobs in my administration. And they've all vowed they will serve at least two years." So you look them in the eye and look at this diverse talent, and whatnot, and then you start to get a sense of, one, could the person assemble good people? And two, what, what you're really getting.

Chris Fussell: Do you think that team, team construct would work, Susan?

Susan O'Malley: [laughs] I, I think so. I mean, I- for better or for worse, I can't vote at the moment, but, uh, [laughs] maybe in a couple years. Um, no, but I... And, and we may get there in a minute, but I, I love what you're saying because I actually think that policy design, right? There's been some emergent work over the years on policy design and design- human-centered design in the context of policy. And I think that's a huge one.

Like, right now in everything we're seeing with the future of work moment, the opportunity to return to the office, not return, you know, designing hybrid, uh, in my client work over the past couple of years, um, in the beginning, it was about, you know, personas and understanding clusters of needs, and families, and

different, you know, different people needing different things. But man, now two years in, trying to reconcile what everybody wants, right? It's not just one policy or one solution's gonna cut it. And I know you guys are thinking a lot about hybrid too.

And so it's kind of emerged in my brain that it's almost like the... like a progressive policy toolkit is the thing that we need policy plus design to move forward through these really complex situations in the, you know, in the war for talent and then the great, the great resignation.

Chris Fussell: On the, um... I mean, you're... we've known each other for, for years now, and you're, um, a systems thinker sort of breaking things down, looking at it from unique lenses. So I'm assuming, as soon as the reality of the pandemic struck and we're, we're, we're gonna go into some sort of strange, you know, remote connected space, extended period, um, I'm guessing your wheels were turning on, on knock-on effects that we would have in, in two years, plus looking back, specific to the DEI conversation. But then even expanding beyond that, um, do you think that's changed the conversation, accelerated, slowed it down? What, what, what changes are there now in this conversation that wouldn't have been had we not been communicating mostly like this for the last two years?

Susan O'Malley: Yeah. It's a really powerful insight and question. And I'll share, you know, a couple of data points from my, from my experience of it. The first is, um... Well, and, and just to be clear, I think we're still learning the lessons of the past, uh, 24 months, right? Or 18 months. We're still working through exactly what, what we've learned or not learned there.

But the first one I wanna put, put on the table is just how, for so many colleagues, and even for myself a little bit, like this was just such an empowering time, even, even with the tragedy and the stress, and the loss and, and, and the real human things that we've all experienced, right? I just wanna be super clear, like, it's been a really difficult couple of years in many cases. But, um, for folks who maybe are more introverted or, or ambiverted, right, it's- like this has been so interesting to be grounded in one place.

Like, even for my own energy and time, I learned a ton about myself, [laughs] uh, that I just didn't- hadn't picked up on in, in 20 years of work, right? That's the first one. Um, the other thing I would say on that, Chris, is, you know, there's been

some great, uh, research coming out around caregivers, families, and in particular, in the American context, you know, bla- black moms and, and black dads, frankly. And their level of happiness, their level of contribution, and the kind of employee engagement stuff.

Right now, it's, it's not good to be reducing the human experience to, like, an employee engagement number, but there's a lot of really interesting stuff coming on stream in the past six months about how... the gains on a society level, right? In terms of how activated and how good it is for certain individuals to be able to, uh, have a more hybridized work environment or more control of their environment at home.

Like, these are really significant, um, things that we're learning and seeing. And I was in a meeting with someone who works at a big tech company, and they said, you know... Uh, I'm, I'm on one of his calls, and he he's a researcher who's, like, prototyping crazy stuff. And he said, you know, "Why does someone not think that me being able to go to the grocery store on a Tuesday morning, or me being able to volunteer at the food bank... like, now I understand how this makes me a better designer, a better [laughs] colleague. And now that I have had this experience, I can't just go back. You know, it actually... it's actually making me a better person, which in turn helps me better fulfill, fulfill my mission."

So there's a lot going on there. I think there's a lot going on for every type of underrepresented group, from what I've seen, and in particular for the neurodiversity community. Um, there's a lot of really interesting stuff that has, has sort of come into i- i- interview.

Chris Fussell: Are, are you optimistic about the ability to maintain enough of the gains while also returning to whatever isn't working like this that needs to come back? Or who knows what that balance will look like, but do you think it's gonna... 'Cause it's clearly pendulum. It had to. Are we gonna find a center, or do you think we'll ever crack like we normally do?

Susan O'Malley: I- I'm cautiously optimistic, but I will say that I think it's gonna, it's gonna differ a lot by, by geography and by sector, right? And if we... To pick... not to pick on them, but an extreme example, if we think, you know, bond traders or commodities experts need to apprentice, you know, beside each other in pins

stripes, then, then awesome. And maybe in that industry, uh, people will select to be there, and, and, you know, that'll, that'll figure itself out.

And so I'm not saying that I see it across the, the board. Um, but I do think that, um, in particular, you know, since the, the Delta wave and then Omicron, uh, just the fact that we've gone so far into this now means that the ca... you know, we really can't sort of go, go back. And what I think is, um... What makes a difference to your question, Chris, is the extent to which leaders are understanding that, right? That even when they go back, they're gonna feel like newcomers in this new environment.

And, and so it's not just gonna be going back to, to normal. I think there is a, there is a gravity with power and, and status in companies that a lot of those leaders love those times when they could just, you know, get someone to do something, or, or walk the halls. But, but that's not really gonna be the reality that, that talent wants.

Um, and there's another quick thing on this that felt important. Yeah. I think just the other thing is the second-order effects, right? The second-order consequences where, uh, so many leadership teams... And I was fortunate to be doing work for a number of large companies during the pandemic on this. The skill, uh, of the leaders to, to vision the second-order effects, the knock-on effects. And I know, uh, Mike Zanko and your team is big into this.

It's just a skill that's missing. And they don't know how to relate stuff they're hearing on the front lines, up to some of the strategic choices, and they can't think about, "Okay, assuming this thing is true, what's gonna ha- happen after it? And what would that imply? And what would that imply?"

And a, a great example of this was Dropbox with their studio office policy, where, uh, right around the time Delta was coming in and people thought they were going back, and then they weren't, Dropbox sort of called it and said, "The offices are now sort of more like WeWorks. They're more like studios. We're going virtual first for, you know, all the talent and performance stuff. And the space now has a different role."

And I think that was absolutely the right call to make. It was a bold move, but it made sense. And it took months, and months, and months for other companies to catch up and say, "At the point when it's gonna be two years, you know, it- yeah,

we need to radically kind of redesign what we have, uh, what we're assuming is normal."

Chris Fussell: So acknowledging that it's gonna take a long time to reverse engineer, unlearn what we learned. Um-

Susan O'Malley: Yeah.

Chris Fussell: 'Cause it's happened so fast. But can, can you connect... build the bridge between that observation and the DEI discussion? Like, are we, are we going to... Do you think we're seeing differences there and, um, so-socioeconomics or, um, ho- home re- realities or any number of things, educations, um, in the community? All the other things, supporting networks that would've made the, the, the differences in this last two years, like, drastically different between groups that are part of the DEI conversation. Or is that, is that gonna be remodeled?

Susan O'Malley: Yeah, absolutely. Let me, let me try and thread it, and maybe you can help me if I'm hot or cold, or, you know, go Goldilocks [laughs] in, in the middle. Um, the first thing, just to state the obvious, 'cause I think sometimes that's really helpful, is, you know, we're seeing probably one of the most interesting and amazing or difficult talent markets prob- well, in my lifetime, for sure, and maybe in, in, in your lifetime too, right? In terms of people voting with their feet, people's connection to the mission on purpose, right?

And this is, this is, I think, one of the big ideas of our time, is that the extent to which people are being selective about what they need and what they want. And that's a really amazing thing, right? I think we, we still live in a, in a country where there's massive inequity. Uh, the returns to capital have been so much higher than to labor, right? In, in recent decades. And so giving people back, uh, more agency in how they're choosing to work is, is huge. So the headline there is people are gonna continue to vote with their feet, right? Um, and so that's the first thing I would say.

Um, the second thing is, you know, companies, I think, need multiple levels of action here. And, and this is how I've kind of worked through this myself as an individual, right? Multiple levels, whether it's the individual human, human level, uh, the organizational team level, and then ultimately the societal level, right?

Like, trying to define actions that are gonna help move the needle on this topic, even if they are, they're very small, right?

And I'll give you a really... an example that's helped me. Um, one is just sort of, uh, you know, whether it's mentoring, or coaching, or spending time with folks interested in the industries that I've been in who maybe don't have access to that network. And I think we, we give a lot of credence to introductions, and networks, and LinkedIn, and all that kind of stuff. But actually, sometimes there's specialized information that is so obvious to us about, you know, "Apply for this type of role here," or, "Hey, that's actually... that thing on paper is not the same as it, as it needs to be," right? So spending time together, talking through these things, and sharing knowledge and information is a, is a really critical one.

Um, the second one is sort of peer groups. So a lot of my colleagues from graduate school started an initiative where we would get on the phone every month or two and coach each other, and talk through the problems that we were seeing. And al- almost like a little operations forum, or a, a war room. Like, sharing in real time, you know, "What are you trying? How is it working? That was hard. You know, what's, what's going on? Help each other."

And that was really important because some of us were working in companies that were just not changing, right? Where leaders admitted this was not a problem. And actually having that, uh, coaching mechanism to help each other was, was really critical.

Um, and the third one is on the societal level, right? Actually being open to saying when we're, you know, we're on a Zoom call, and we're waiting for the news from a trial, or we know that people in the communities are, are hurting because of a climate disaster or, or something else that has happened that we... maybe this is not a day when it's business as usual. And we have to understand, you know, what is gonna help our teams and help our employees.

And so I, I think it's really difficult companies. And we can talk more about this. You know, they need fantastic people, analytics teams, they need to operationalize DEI. They need the data. They need to totally overhaul and redesign recruiting, but it's- it, it can't just be... You know, the, the energy in these companies is so much towards solving, and building, and making. And we actually have to look at the whole picture, uh, in order to be able to sort of move the needle. And it is going to

take, you know, years, if not decades. And we have to have the stamina and resilience to, to, to know that.

Stan McChrystal: Yeah. Susan, to me, I, I try to wrap my mind around this. I'm, I'm sometimes struck with what seems to me a little bit of a contradiction. On the one hand, at the school level, we have reached a consensus that kids do very well in-person learning. And yet, we've reached a contradictory conclusion that we think we can work dispersed. And yet, those two... to me, there's a little bit of attention between those two conclusions, not sure what that means.

But what I'd ask is, when we talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion, we're, we're talking on two levels, one the strict efficiency or effectiveness of an organization. And we're talking about a larger societal question as well. If I live in my house and I work from my home office or my kitchen, and I interact with my family, and everything else is virtual, to a degree, I would argue it starts to be a little bit transactional. And those people at the other end lose a little of their diversity because they're... and particularly if we wander into the Metaverse, then we can be whatever we want. We could be dinosaurs and whatnot.

But- so I'm, I'm trying to figure out whether or not that, uh, phenomenon won't actually pull us further away from DEI, won't challenge our ability, 'cause we're just not creating the go- the global gathering places, or even the local gathering places. What do you think?

Susan O'Malley: Yeah, I, I love that question. Um, and I think, I, I think you're, you're totally onto something there, right? I mean, it's, it's sort of, uh, different, different bubbles, right? Different rooms, different spaces. We might just be in the same, the same virtual bubbles. So I, I absolutely hear you on that.

You know, um, the, the concept of operating rhythm is coming up a lot at the moment, and it's been on this call. And maybe we can talk about it in a second. But I actually think that my personal point of view, for better or for worse, is- this- is actually that the gathering matters, right, more than ever. And it's the intentionality of when, when are we choosing to gather, when are we choosing to go? Is it on a regional level, a local level? On a, on a corporate level? On an international level? Like, like these things don't go away. I think it's just about figuring out the right cadence, the right momentum, the right torque, and, and really making them, uh, meaningful.

Um, I think that the, the missing superpower here for so many, um, leadership teams and companies is actually this intentionality around process, right? And this is what I love about all of your, your writing and so much of the work that you're- that the McChrystal Group does is, uh, the, the power of these really amazing orchestrated, uh, processes and structures that, that are fit for the modern world, right? Versus relics and stuff from, you know, 20, 50, 100 years ago.

Um, and, and I'll give you an example. You know, how many Zoom calls are you in, or, or, you know, whatever we use, this video system, where it's just sort of like... the assumption is it's just a video version of the thing we would've accidentally done, right? And, and we're not sort of making decisions in a super structured way. We're not necessarily sharing information. And so much of what we're experiencing in the virtual world is just, like, the same type of meeting over and over again.

And maybe if we work at, you know, a company like IDEO, we have slightly more creative versions of those workshops, but, but really, stepping back and reflecting on what process are we using here to have this conversation? And I think if we, you know, if we were working in venture capital, or if we were a movie director at Pixar, right, we would know, "Oh, we have a brain trust meeting, or we have a decision meeting. Like, we have a, we have a way that we're orchestrating, um, how we're collaborating."

And so part of what's made operating rhythms so powerful right now, and I see this from a lot of colleagues and friends too, is this intentionality around, what do we need? How do we design it so it's truly fit and purposeful? And how do we get people, um, get people activated, uh, around that energy? And so it's, it's really... You know, if there's a chance that you guys will publish a, a, a follow up to Team of Teams or One Mission, I, I would vote for, like, networked org structures, for sure. Like, lots of cool stuff there that's emerged.

And I think, actually, the operating rhythm is a, is a really, uh, cool one. And the last thing I'll say is, you know, time, right? Even the concept of time at work has just completely... it's- I mean, for many of us, it's been a, a disaster, but also a source of rich learning in terms of how we, we use time, right? And this is, um... Something like an operating rhythm is a key tool to really design, uh, design how we work to shape our needs as people, and also to have the impact that we wanna, that we wanna have on the world.

Chris Fussell: Uh, great, great observations. Um, maybe just one final reflection from you. Um, hey, thank- thanks for the time. Awesome discussion. Um, not surprising you're, you're, you're, you're deep on every topic I ever talked to you about.

Susan O'Malley: Oh, thanks.

Chris Fussell: So this is not, not a surprise, but an awes- awesome way to spend an hour.

Susan O'Malley: Yeah.

Chris Fussell: Um, S- Stan, aside from wo- our work at McChrystal Group, we work with young leaders, teach seminar at graduate school at Jackson, uh, at Yale, Jackson Institute. Um, and we talk about sort of what, what leaders should be thinking about going in into the workforce. I know you mentor young leaders coming up. Um, you probably do formal work with groups. How do you advise them?

You know, if you've got a 22-year-old, brilliant, energetic future leader, what should that person be thinking about? Perhaps on the DEI topic, but more broadly the impacts of the last two years. How do you advise them about the space they're stepping into?

Susan O'Malley: Yeah. Awesome. I love the question. And I think, um, one thing to say is that, you know, there's... sometimes in leadership and management, there's a lot of a bias towards academic, uh, achievement or, or routes, right? And so I think it, it, uh... And I- that's the world where I spent a lot of my time, but I think it's really important to think about opportunities to foster leadership and impact from folks that may not be entering, you know, formal, uh, you know, advanced education structures or, or, or, or universities. Uh, that's the first one to put out on the table.

Um, look, you know, I was thinking about this yesterday, and for some reason, the image of, of, um, uh, Clay Christensen's innovation model, you know, the sort of low end disruption thing of the curves, I was thinking about this, this moment we're in with, with companies and thinking about how we- it- in some places, it kind of feels like we have to just swap out entire levels or entire teams, right? And

I'm not... I don't mean that in a mean, unkind way. I think there are people who maybe wanna step to the side or step back, or, or play a less prominent role in, in being in the front of, right? We know we can lead from the, the center, and the middle, and the back.

And so the reason I mentioned this is that there's so much, um, incredible energy in, in, in, in, in communities and in youth activism groups that, that, that really the, the space has just been blown up open for, for leadership at every level. And so I encourage people to, to lean into that. I mean, I think we're in an unbelievably interesting moment with, you know, Web3 decentralized organizations, uh, communities, networks there. And I think getting involved in that space is one thing that I would really, uh, recommend people do.

And I don't necessarily mean, you know, investing in crypto. I think it's, it's problematic that crypto has historically been, you know, ve- very male or very white, but I do think that technology can support, um, new types of, of organizations and communities in a really powerful way. And so I think if I were, you know, 20 or 30 years younger, um, that's what I would, uh, I would, I would look at for sure.

Um, the second and third one real quick, and then we... then we're gonna wrap is, the second one is, you know, following that purpose and that meaning, right? Like, you are, you are the only one that can create meaning for yourself, right? And at different times in your life, you'll have different, different appetite for that. And, and, uh, John Gardner, who I'm sure you guys know, know of well or are students of, the, the great American public figure in the 20th century, you know, he has an essay on self-renewal, which I reread all the time. And I give to people when they're going on sabbatical, or when they're switching jobs.

And he talks about meaning in life. And so cultivating friends and, and either mentors or mentoring yourself, and, and people with whom you can have those type of conversations, the types of frameworks around the tensions and the stress, right? It's like, this is not necessarily gonna be easy. And so thinking about the spaces in your, in your life, where you can have, and, and find the meaning.

And the third one real quick, I'll say, which connects it back to Team of Teams and, and One Mission. And this is not a force connection. Like, I really believe this... You know, your model of tactical, operational, strategic... like, the amount of

times I whiteboard that out on the fly or in a, in a virtual meeting room, like, I'm not kidding you, it's been one of the most useful frameworks in my life.

And, and I wanna tell you a very quick story about leadership behavior, and, and really how there is no behavior action from a leader or from a colleague too small, right? And it relates to an experience I had with you all, uh, doing physical therapy, uh, on the mall, doing some, some running and jogging, and, and doing that amazing tour of the monuments that you guys bring to, to folks who, who come. This was at one of the early chief of staff academies, which was a phenomenal experience.

And real quick, the, the point of the story is, you know, we're... there's a jogging group and a walking group, and it's a, it's a phenomenal experience. You know, the sun is rising on the monuments. We're all- we- everybody has goosebumps, right? We're running along. And sometimes a few of us are struggling, or there's people taking photographs, or pe- people that are not crossing the road on time. And one of the leaders says, "Hey, can we, can we, you know, keep it together or bunch up, or, or pick up some speed?"

Um, and this happens a couple times, but this next time it happens, the person doesn't say, "Speed up," or, "Hey, stragglers," or, "Hey, photo takers." He tells the people in the front to slow down a minute and catch a breath. And he says, you know, "We need to keep it, we need to keep it firm. We need to keep it tight, 'cause there's a motorcade coming, or 'cause there's traffic, or because, you know, there's, there's people. We need to be respectful."

And just that little action, right, of me, you know, trying to, trying to keep up with the- all the great fo- military folks, and they're fitter than I am, but we're all having this great walk together. And just that action of not assuming that it was too fast or too slow, and leading with the why and saying, "You know, we're here as a cohort to have this walk together, let's, let's keep it tight."

And so that's been a really instructive story for me. And I think about it often in a meeting, where I'm like, "Am I in the too fast or too slow camp? And what's the, what's the bunching? You know, what's the real thing we're targeting in this moment?" So no, no operation too small. We don't, we don't fail when we get it wrong or we're clumsy, or we, we make a mistake. We, we, we fail when we don't, we don't try.

Stan McChrystal: Wow. I'm always in the camp going the wrong way. It doesn't matter what speed I am. I'll tell you what, Susan, your generosity with your time and your wisdom is just deeply appreciated. And, of course, you know, you've been a, you've been a great friend and a great leader.

Susan O'Malley: Yeah. Thank you so much. This was such an incredible honor.

Stan McChrystal: Absolutely. Thank you, guys. Take care.

Susan O'Malley: Bye-bye. Thanks.

Chris Fussell: So, um, we both know- known Susan for, for years. Fa- fascinating person. First got to know her when she was working at IDEO, she'd come from Google, and now she's off at Genentech. Um, and I think she gets pulled in just for her... amongst her many talents, just her... um, the way her brain works. She just thinks things deeply, but at interesting angles on so many different topics.

Um, I've never had the same conversation with her twice. And every door you open, you find out she's very well-read and has thoughtful opinions about it. Um, but also, any- anyone I've met from, um, the IDEO community, we've had some of their leaders on before on No Turning Back, uh, they, they all, they all come from diverse backgrounds to the point of the conversation, but they have this shared, um, uh, way of thinking. You know, they're just... they deconstruct things and sort of, without being argumentative, wanna find, you know, the right way to rebuild things.

Um, so I'm curious from your perspective, would you agree, agree with that, the folks you've interacted, um, with at IDEO? And then more broadly, so many organizations hunger for that. We want to find that sort of secret sauce. Um, special operations gets a lot of, uh, credit from the outside. It seems like you've cracked the code. We can talk more about why we think that is or isn't. I think it mostly is. Um, but any, any reflections on how an organization, um, can put in place a system to, to really help them get there?

Stan McChrystal: Yeah. You, you remember someone we both served with, Scott Miller. He was commanding Delta Force during a period, and then later commanded, uh, Joint Special Operations, commanded... and, and just more recently commanded all forces in Afghanistan. And I remember, I don't know how

many times you'd be in the room and we'd be looking at a problem, and he would just sit there and says, "Okay, the problem is really this."

And what he would've done is risen up 30,000 feet. He would have captured the entire situation. He would've summarized it concisely. And of course, I tried to pretend, "Yeah, I knew that." And I'd just be sitting there, and go, "How did he see that?"

I was also in a room once with Henry Kissinger, and we were talking about strategic thinking of, of Europe, or something. And the same sort of thing, he brought rigor of thought to it that says, "Here's how you have to think strategically about this issue." Susan is one of those. She's one of those people that just sees it clearly, because maybe it's that discipline thinking of the design process that says, "I have to think what problem we're trying to solve, and what are criteria that are important to me?" But every time I'm around her, I think she could talk about any subject, and she would bring that kind of clarity to it.

Chris Fussell: It is an art though. Um, and I've learned, I've learned this from you over the years of, um, having the radar up for the person who wants to step back and say, you know, "Why, why do we breathe in the first place?" There's some, you know, fluffy high level question that really isn't gonna help you get anywhere. Um, there's a, there's a, there's a line between that and the productive, "Let's step back and ask the right strategic question."

Um, do you have, do you have any tricks you've learned over the years to, to, to toggle your radar between hot air and actually productive conversation? It's gonna slow you down, but it really is the right question to be having.

Stan McChrystal: Yeah, it's a great... Because you're exactly right. As soon as I get that person who asks that, you know, "Why are we on earth?" You just throw... you mentally eject them from the room. The way I do it is, is the person connecting their comment to us getting to a solution? The way Susan thinks about something, she says, "Okay, we are trying to solve this, therefore, we have to think about this."

The others, I think, are naysayers, really, just trying to seem smarter than they are because nothing they have connects to actually getting something done. And so I think a, a real design person goes to that point of, "I've gotta serve some function." And Susan helps connect. And, and that's the way I consider them.

Chris Fussell: Um, Su- Susan's also a prolific reader. Um, she does a lot of her own work, obviously, uh, as, as are you. Um, and I certainly try to, try to read whenever I can, um, take it seriously. Any thoughts there?

We, we, we haven't had... we don't go into that space a lot with our guests, you know, around what, what are you reading? The assumption is they're sort of deeply immersed in their, their topic, which is usually true. Uh, but she made some great references, uh, across multiple domains, right? Um, so any, any things you- you've learned over the years about how you, uh, divvy up your, your reading time between topics? Do you like to go deep on one single topic until you've run it dry, and then you move on to the next? Are you, are you reading four books at once about a, a range of topics?

Stan McChrystal: Yeah, it's interesting. I've always been reading multiple books at once. I typically have one that I'm listening to, an audible book. And then I have one that's on my net nightstand that I read there. And then I have one down in the living room that I'm reading there. All on different topics.

When we were deployed, uh, I had, like, to listen to books when I worked out a lot. And so I would have my wife go to the library... And those were days when you got them on CDs... and she would download them to a laptop. And then when we would go- come back periodically, I'd get them all, I'd put on my iPod then, and use them for working out. But they were never military books. They were business books. They were, you know, different things because I found military stuff was sort of... you know, we know a lot of that.

I- I'd much rather somebody tell me about something I don't know. I'm not big on fiction. Occasionally, I'll read fiction, but I like that breadth of things. And what, what Susan does is she connects the dots. You know, I don't know how many times you, you run into somebody and they say, "I've just read a new book," and they are so enthused about it that they are a- an apostle for a single narrow idea, the hedgehog idea for a period of time, until they forget that, and they go to another.

Susan doesn't do that. She's the fox. And she connects different ideas, and gets a synthesis, uh, of them, which I find really helpful.

Chris Fussell: Yeah, no, it is a, it is a good personal rule, I, I think, and then a rule of thumb when you're just sort of meeting people in industry. Um, it- obviously, as

you said, Susan's a great example of this. If the topic is healthcare... I'm not a healthcare subject matter expert, but if you are interacting with someone who is very deep because of the one book they just read, versus someone like Susan who's like, "Here's, here's sort of the range of thinking that's out there. I'm not a, you know, a healthcare policy person, but on one end, you have this person, or this set of articles, these studies, and over here, you have this. And I think it's somewhere in here. That's where my thinking is right now."

It's a totally different conversation. So I'm, I'm a huge believer, um, learning from people like Susan. If you, if you want to go into a topic, you know, force yourself to think, think across it. And I also think a range of different books than any one time is just a better way to keep your, uh, your brain, uh, active and awake.

Um, you know, one, one final point on, on Susan, I'm curious, your reflections here, the, um... I think you and, you and I both have an affinity for those sort of cross-domain leaders. Um, I mean, you could take someone like Susan and put her in the White House under, uh, you know, artificial intelligence policy, and she'd be great at it. I don't know if she does anything in that space, but, you know, within six months, she'd be... she'd get along with everyone, she'd understand the space, and she would make positive impact in it. Um, do you think that's a, a, a learned skill? Do you look for leaders like that and try to move them around?

Stan McChrystal: I do. And you are one of them, and that's one of the reasons why I wanted to work for you. Uh, the... I think it's born. I don't think you teach that. I think it's partially... you have to have a certain kind of intellect, a level of curiosity, a certain humility to work with people.

If you go back and look at what President Kennedy did on the Bay of Pigs, uh, he, he took the group that was sort of around him, and he did the Bay of Pigs, and he got a bad outcome. When it came to the Cuban missile crisis, he cherry-picked some additional personalities to bring them into the mix because he was looking for certain attributes like you just described, someone who, whenever they're in the conversation, the outcome is a bit better, even though they may not be the expert.

I think Susan's a classic case of that. Now, how do you find those people? I- I've had people describe to me as being that way, and I've known some, but I'm not sure what you do to... you know, what school there is that really gets you there.

Chris Fussell: Yeah. We'll put the... um, all the references that Susan made, uh, in the, in the notes. And there was one book that we didn't talk about, but I'm a big believer in... And you have an intuitive sense for this. The book is the Cap- The Captain Class, um, by Sam Walker. It came out right around the same time as a Team of Teams or One Mission in there.

Um, and it studies through athletics, um, the team captain phenomena, uh, but it's something you've said many times over the years. Like, there, there are those players that you put onto a team, put them in a platoon, put them in a headquarters, and they're not gonna be your best ops boss. They're not the tireless worker, but they're gonna make the whole thing work better. And Walker does a great job of breaking down some of the most successful teams in history, that there was this other player on there that, that didn't have the most goals, but was made the captain by their peers and just made everybody work harder.

They had these, uh, sort of intangible qualities that... Then he would compare those other equally talented teams that didn't do nearly as well, because they lacked that one personality. Most of whom in the world... some were famous, but most of them in the world would never know who they were. They were just the engine that made it all work.

Stan McChrystal: Yeah, I think that's right. And I wanna take it also, one last point, you and Barry, just... Barry Sanders... just were at least a really fascinating article. Because we've been talking a lot about where people should work, hybrid, this sort of thing, distributed. And everybody's looking for the answer. And they're looking for this sort of narrow thing they want to grab on to it. And they either want to be the, the person who, uh, pushes that idea or live it.

And you, you bring up the absolute point, that everybody's missing the point. The point is, you have to solve the problem, which is to make your organization effective, which means that it's not gonna be the same for any two organizations. It's not even gonna be the same for one organization over time, 'cause things will change. The answer is, whatever works is the right answer. And it goes back to my quote, "If it's stupid and it works, it ain't stupid." So how can leaders not fall in love with a single idea, and instead fall in love with the idea, "We are gonna do whatever works"?

Chris Fussell: I had a, I had a discussion with a client recently who gave this, you know, three-paragraph, you know, wonderfully articulated point about how they're, uh, studying, and designing, and rethinking it. Uh, and I- at the end, I said, "Let me capture that." I think you just said if it's, if it's broke, but it works, it ain't broke.

[laughing]

Well, yeah. I mean, I guess that's a simpler way of saying that. Uh, but no, it's exactly... And, and, you know, I, I learned this, first and foremost, in the, in the special operations world where that the organization went from a very structured way of doing business to structured, unstructured, remote, together, small team, big team. Constantly adapting to the problem around it, um, to be able to, to win. Not, not... it wasn't, it wasn't looking for the new org chart. It was looking for how to be successful, regardless of what the paper said you had to do. So I think, uh, I think we'll all be better by learning that.

Stan McChrystal: I couldn't agree more.

Chris Fussell: Great discussion with Susan. Uh, thanks to her, her and her team. And, uh, good, uh, good reflections here.

Stan McChrystal: Thanks to you, Chris.

Chris Fussell: Thanks, everybody.

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