Stan: How do you balance the need to have that sort of visceral emotional connection with people with geographical separation?

Chris: Talk about ego and leadership. When does it help? When does it get in the way?

Stan: What's the most difficult moment as a leader. If you, if you ever sat back and said that was the moment I either was unprepared for it, or it was just so difficult. That it has stayed with me forever. Do you have one of those?

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

Anna: This week, Stan and Chris take some listener questions - and answer some of the burning questions on their minds. As we transition out of the COVID-19 pandemic and look to the future of leadership, they took 40 minutes to dive into what they, and our listeners, are thinking about. They reflect on helpful lessons from communicating in a remote environment, consider the relationship between leadership and ego, as well as the tensions between habits, rule-following, and adapting to be efficient to attack crises at hand. We hope you enjoy the thoughtful dialogue. Thanks to our listeners who submitted questions.

Now, over to Chris.

Chris: And we'll, we'll dive in. So, the day we've done this once in the past, uh, we're now about a year into the podcast and really enjoy pushing sort of open-ended invitation to our listeners to send it in questions. You know, we do a lot of this in our Reflections during a normal podcast, but we're going to take the next 30 or 40 minutes and tackle some of the, some of the great leadership questions that came in.

Thanks to all of those who sent in over various social media platforms. And we plan to do this every six months, or so. So, keep it in mind and if you want to push up in our way at any point, we keep them sort of a rolling collection of these. I'm going to dive in and push a first question towards you, Stan, [if] that's okay, from the list. And we'll start at the sort of high level, and then we can get into more current or challenging stuff as we go through it. But, you know, a great question we get all the time from, from students that we teach at Yale or, even, even clients that we're working with.

What's one thing would have been most valuable to know, or do early on in your leadership journey, that you only understood after decades of experience looking backwards? Sort of a classic leadership question, but I'll throw that one to you to start.

Stan: Yeah. And it's fun because when we talk to our students, they are often thinking about how can they become a more effective leader? And so, they're interested in tools and techniques and,

and we've modified our course over the years to get more toward first principles, because at the end of the day, the thing that turns out to be most important is that foundation of values.

It's an understanding of who you are, what your beliefs are, what your limits are, what you will do, and won't do. And we find that if leaders don't have that foundation, everything else is transitory. If they do have that foundation, you know, they may stumble with little ways they do things, but the reality is they're grounded.

And so, I always say, if you get the basics right, everything else is going to come much more easily.

Chris: Staying on that if you comment there and then kick it back to you, if you want to pick up the next question and dive in, but it is, one of the points we, we try to make, especially the young leaders is when the time comes, you're not going to recognize that you're in the middle of making one of the most important leadership decisions, right? It's, it's constrained by time, by pressure, by unpredictable variables, and so you, that foundation… when you look back at that moment, you'll realize that foundation helped you stay inside of the rails and make decisions based on a moral, ethical set of principles that you've been thinking about for years or decades, depending on where you are in your leadership journey, which is the, the point of constantly studying other leaders, reading, looking around you in the, in the, in the current environment, looking through history and trying to learn from others, it'll serve you well in the moment that you can't anticipate.

Stan: Yeah. One of the conversations you and I have had an almost every leader approaches me in some way with is now that we're coming out of the pandemic.

How do we take the lessons that we learned about resilience that, that allowed us to survive and move forward and incorporate those and make them more permanent? What do you think?

Chris: I think it's an a, I mean, it's obviously important. There's this window of significant change in my lifetime. And we've, we've talked about this there's so far, there's 9/11, and there's this year, those are the two sort of key chapter events in in my lifetime and I'm 48 years old. So, I think the, one of the important things that will come out of this is our recognition that we have to move faster as organizations, in, in today's world. And that doesn't mean chaos, doesn't mean just sprinting everywhere. The organizations that have come through this past year or year and a half the best, despite all the, all the horrible things going on around the world where those that quickly identified, this is a, this is a really serious situation. Some did that in, you know, 15 to 20 days, some did 15 weeks. Right? And so, the key there that we saw, and I've seen, is the ability of senior leaders to communicate down to the frontline and get honest truth flowing back and forth.

This was one of the key tenants of how you redesigned special operations. And then on the backside of that sort of moment of chaos organizations have gotten into a more steady rhythm of communication. And we did this ourselves at McChrystal Group, where we went from a twice weekly to a seven-day cadence almost immediately at the beginning of this.

And now we, we live on a five-day cadence and as needed over the weekends, uh, which is aggressive, but keeps us very, very tuned in other big organizations have done that. And, and, because of the crisis, but now it's becoming a steady drumbeat, sort of, you used to call your daily ops and intel update, the heartbeat of the organization.

And I think that applies here and I hope large organizations retain that style of communication because it drives that transparency from senior leadership down to the frontline and allows you to move and adapt as fast or faster than the environment around you is changing.

Stan: You know, that is so key. I many years ago, I was a company commander of a mechanized infantry company, and I have a head mechanic and I remember asking him what break or breakdown on an armored vehicle do you most worry about?

And he, he looked at me. He says, “Sir, I can fix anything. What worries me is if I lose my toolbox.” And that really jumps out at me is when you talk about communication, if we lose our ability to fix things, by communicating, by adapting, then we got real problems.

Chris: Yeah. I haven’t heard that vignette before. It's a great, it's a great one though.

You know, it reminds me of… I used to love this debate inside when I was still in the service inside the special operations community. And it's something that I sort of stolen from watching you interact with the organization and would. So, I pose the question: what, what makes us so unique and different right now, this, this special operations, as it, as it currently stands?

And you'd get, we're more experienced. The helicopters are faster, this, all of this range of stuff that was really focused on the problem. And I would always argue, I think it's our infrastructure. That's our toolbox, the way that we can communicate and pass information. I mean, we're moving terabytes of data from remote corners around the world, and that had never been done before. There's been helicopters for a long time. There's never been that level of information flow, so that I think really understanding what, what is your toolbox is such an important lesson in that for, for the leaders?

Take a little bit of a pivot here. This is a question from Scott Branham. Thanks for sending it in, Scott.

And he says, “How do you deliver a message of operational failure to a multi-generational workforce who was at different levels of experience and tenure within an organization without

using cliche, cliche, coaching speak, or coming across as having narrow-minded or military only perspective?"

I think it's a great, it's a great question. I'll, I'll take a, a light swing at it, to start, Stan. I think the, one of the things that I think we try to do is, is to be very honest, with those in your organization. And when there are moments of failure, uncertainty, identifying like, "Okay, this, this went wrong. We don't know why yet," right? And get out in front of that very quickly.

We're, here's what we're, here's what we know. Here's what we think may have happened. Here's what we're trying to learn from just that… that any of those countless ways you can do that, but getting into the middle of the conversation. AAnd speaking with honesty and transparency, not a sky is falling, "we don't know what to do" sort of approach, but just being very present with those in your organization, I think can help create an authenticity between a leadership team and those in their organization.

Stan: Yeah. One of the techniques that it's possible that some of our listeners aren't familiar with, I remember watching the SEALs execute and that's the After-Action Review. And it really gets to the idea of, if you have failure in the organization, there's often a lot of defensiveness, somebody thinks they're going to be blamed or, or that sort of thing. And one of the best things you can do is go through a very disciplined unemotional process that first determines what actually happened, because one of the things they found out during World War II and they studied, this is there would be a firefight and there would be one version of what happened, and it was always wrong.

Because actually the perspective of almost every participant was needed to put this thing together, to get a clear picture of what happened. And then the focus is on how do we do better next time? And so, when I watched you and really elite operators so an operation and then come back and dissect it on emotionally, put the pieces together, then the lessons come out and it's, it's not finger pointing. And I think organizations can step back and let that process of the After-Action Review. Give them a real aid in, in confronting sometimes a great big failures.

Chris: You know, for those, those listeners that are really interested in that sort of thing, it's a, it's a Google away. You can look up the Blue Angels hotwash. The Blue Angels, the, you know, specialized flight team inside the US Navy and there's other forces, but the Blue Angels around forever. They're obviously, they're not a war fighting unit, but what they do in the air is incredible and they are they're, they're selected the best pilots in the Navy that gets selected to go on to that team.

And their After-Action Reviews are hot washes are, are notorious for being down to the second inch of separation between aircraft sort of brutal honesty and on the ground, you think it looks perfect every time. But there's a great short documentary out there, that you can look up on the

internet that, that walks, that shows listeners how they do that with one another. And it's a, really a testament to that sort of, that sort of After-Action or hotwash. You know, there's a, there's one in here, that I think I'd love to get your thoughts on and I could build on it, but it was so near and dear to what you did inside of the counter-terrorism world.

When it, the question is around remote working from Darren Edkins.

Thanks, Darren, for sending it in. How do leaders take advantage of the remote working situation we are in and can organizational performance be improved with the new ways of working? And my build on that to, just turn it over to you would be a little bit of the background. You had to take centralized units, push them all around the world because we were fighting a network adversary that was everywhere at once.

And so, we were now separated from the mothership and we had to dial in and connect remotely. And so, we can talk more about that, but what were the lessons that you start… I'm assuming that started as we have no other choice, but then you saw an opportunity to build on, on that new approach.

Stan: Right. You've got to take what advantages there are in the situation that you must adapt to the necessity and what we found in JSOC, we were operating across 27 countries, 76 different bases. We had to be connected all the time because the pace of operations, we didn't want to do that out of love to have the entire organization at one base.

And we could get shoulder-to-shoulder. But we couldn't now. I think the same thing happened with COVID-19: organizations were forced and there are some disadvantages, there are some challenges with it, but there are some inherent advantages. And what we've got to do is look at those one is the technology now allows us to move information to every level of the organization, essentially instantaneously.

And before the old chain of command where you let information trickle down through a number of layers and it takes a lot of time and there's a corruption, doesn't have to be the case anymore. And so we don't have to respect that habit and that process. Because that was put in place in a time when that was the only thing that could be done.

Now we can, we can step away. So I think if it gets to your earlier point about communication, if we look at the things that this new environment gives us the ability to communicate very rapidly, the ability to avoid some of the overhead of travel costs or time and those things, we can become more nimble and more focused.

But of course we have to keep one eye out for some of the challenges as well.

Chris: Yeah. There's and a lot of these questions around the current environment, I think tie together, but there's a, there's an interesting takeaway, I think, for the last year to build on your

point and we're all guilty of this. I mean, any one of us wrestles with it, like, am I doing this as a leader or as part of a team.

Because it's the right solution right now, or am I doing it because I've laser really just fallen into this pattern. Um, and that's the, what the rule book or previous leaders, that's how they did it. That's that sort of thing. And you have to regularly challenge yourself. I think your thinking as, as a leader or in a team to say is, this technology allows us to do this differently, more efficiently.

And I remember a moment when I was on your staff a years ago and I'll keep sort of names and places out of this, but watching you interact with, a senior leader, as something was about to happen, and the senior leader was sort of following the rule book checklist saying, and now it was just listening to one side of a phone call.

“Do we have X? And we done, why are we ready with Z?” And your answer was “Yes, yes, yes.” And at a certain point, I remember you saying, “I. I have, I know all the questions you're going to ask me and the answer to all of them is yes. Or I wouldn't be bothering you to say we're ready to go. Right?”

And it was a very plus you're trying to save time and make it more efficient, but it was a moment of recognition to say, you know, there was a time when that had to happen between senior leaders, because the knowledge management wasn't there, that there could be many changes in what was critical to senior leaders on one side of the world versus another. But now was also in interconnected. You could go to a portal, you could see the priorities, you could pass information. And so, you could accelerate that decision-making process. I see what's required. We've done all of it. We're ready to go. And so those… that's just one example. It always stuck out to me where leaders have to, I think, step back and, and regularly say, “Are we doing this out of habit and rule book following? Or is there a more, uh, efficient way we could get, get this accomplished? And often that comes with the unresolved being decentralizing way down into the organization because they can just, you can you're you're saying, uh, is a… eyes on hands-off I think is very applicable here.

Um, actually the next question, could you, be cause we say that a lot, “Eyes on hands-off.” Can you build on that just a little bit? Cause I I've thrown it out….

Stan: Sure. Yeah. The idea of hands-off is our eyes on is that we have an unprecedented ability to see things, to gather data, to know what's happening. It can be through gathering just information, or in our case, as we remember, we were watching every operation from drones above that were providing us full motion video.

It was like watching the, the unfolding of an operation on TV. And we have the ability to listen to radio calls and in fact, we could have spoken to them. So, the idea that we have the ability to

know what, what is happening is unprecedented to a level, particularly when you're distributed across multiple continents and it's still able to do that.

And yet, the temptation to micromanage has to be fought, because the reality is, although you can see it, it should provide you an understanding and appreciation so that you can do those things appropriate to your role in the organization. But let the people closer to the problem actually solve it because the reality is from 10,000 feet, I might be watching a SEAL platoon land on an objective they're moving around, but the reality is I'm not there with them. I don't know how dark it is. I don't know how cold it is. I don't know how tired they are. I, I can't hear crack of bullets. I can't make those" on the ground decisions" like leaders on the ground can make. I can screw them up if I reach in and start trying to micromanage. But what I can do is I can start to put in place supporting arms, reinforcements, medivac, though, all the things. And I can also develop an appreciation of how the fight is going, so that I can take action on other parts of the battlefield.

It's a, it's a balance of… it's a tension between the ability that the full capability of information technology now to, to reach and control everybody. And then the personal self-discipline or the organizational self-discipline not to do it.

Chris: Yeah. I was just having this conversation with, um, an executive yesterday.

And this will maybe bridge over this next question I want to throw out. But, um, one of the ways, one of the most important ways I think to fight for, for a leader to force him or herself to fight that micromanagement tendency, which is so easy now, because to your point, you can see everything. You can be everywhere at once.

If you choose to [the] discipline of operational cadence, the operating rhythm of the organization, as we would call it. And so, forcing yourself as a leader to say, "Here's here are my priorities. Here's how I'm going to spend my time," and bar something above this red line, which should only be two or three things, should be only a few things that would pull me away from that operational cadence. And it forces that… it forces you to break away from the micromanagement down on end to say no, no, no. This is the, this is the daily sync that I do with my, you know, key partners or whatever it is. And none of these above the red line, things are happening.

So I'm going to take my, I'm going to step away from the micromanagement and get back into the strategic. And you and I both joke you you're much more disciplined about it, but I try to follow it as well. We live by our calendar. When it's on there, I'm going to do it. If it's not on there, I don't, I don't know that it's enough of a priority.

So, technology can be an enabler to help you apply discipline to your, to your, uh, approach to running the organization.

Stan: To a story about that, too, because it also gets to understanding your role. In 1992, we'd come back from the First Gulf War and we were doing the big JSOC training exercise, and I was out at Dugway Proving grounds, and that was going to be where the target areas were going to be and SEALs and other parts of the Rangers were all involved. And as we were waiting for forces to come in and start to execute on the ground. We got word that in a flight of helicopters, one of the helicopters had gone down. Now I'm in the tower at an airfield. And in that tower is several people helping me coordinate operations, but also a four-star general, General Carl Stiner was there, the commander of all US Special Operating Forces with several members of Congress who he brought along to watch the operation. And first, we got word that a helicopter had landed and then we got word, "No, there's a fireball." And so it was clear there had been a crash. And in the next, probably 20 minutes, we started to get word of with more detail.

Another helicopter had been able to land near the crash site. It was obviously going to be fatal for what turned out to be more than 12 people on the aircraft and General Stiner was there in the, the tower of the aircraft. And he watched me work in it and then he stood up and he looked at the members of Congress and he said, "Okay, ladies and gentlemen, it's time for us to leave. They've got work to do." And it was, extraordinary self control because this was going to be a big news story. This was loss of life. These members of Congress, of course, fascinated and concerned about what was happening, but he had the discipline to note that was not the time he should be involved in the actions.

And there aren't a lot of leaders who would have shown that kind of self control, but I, but I admired and appreciated him, for forever from that.

Chris: Well, you know, the, one of the interesting takeaways from that is that it was a peacetime, relatively speaking, leader. A lot… more folks learned that in the after years of time on the battlefield, but that's, that's impressive.

Stan: Chris, let me ask you something, if I could.

We've got an interesting tension now. I think of SEAL platoons that I think of the trust that is built up in a relatively small group of people. And it's built up through an understanding of each other's competence and their commitment. And now that we are distributed more, how do you balance the need to have that sort of visceral emotional connection with people with geographical separation?

Chris: Yeah, I mean, it's the, it's this… everyone says we're going hybrid. Right. Which I always say, and we use that language is, you know, running a hybrid organization. We've been talking about that for, for years. But I also think hybrid is historically thrown in there when we're not really sure what it's going to be.

So it's, you know, it's the mix between two things as we sort it out. Yeah. You know, the magic of small teams is, um, in the military and sports, wherever you look, an operating room, you spend condensed time together in physical space. And that, that still exists, you know, in the military, certainly, and, and, and will in and small unit world, but as organizations now, we're in this distributed sort of, view. I think two or three things that come to mind, that are going to be critical.

One that, because a lot of them were talking to our leaders, the drum beat and consistency of communication from a leader. And it has to be more regular, more honest and forthright about what's going on in the environment, and more focused on culture. Then you have to apply in a physical environment.

Because culture exists in the hallways. It's like, as we like to say. And so, you might have a sloppy day as a leader and forget to say, “Hey, remember our core values. Remember this is what we do for our clients.” And somebody will pick that up in the hallway and be like, talk to the new guy and say, “Hey, never forget, you know, client first,” or whatever, whatever the important things are.

That has to come there's no, follow-up now, so it has to come from leaders, those, those mantras. And, and reminders. I think the consistency, we talked about it briefly, but the consistency of the operating rhythm of an organization. Technology is right at our fingertips. And so, organizations that don't synchronize and leverage video and audio and pull people in with regularity, to me, it's sort of a little bit mindboggling and unforgivable at this point, right. And people say, “Oh, we do that every quarter.” I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about, I mean, we have less than a hundred people and we sync five days a week. And you're there, I’m there, everybody's there. It's so easy now. Everyone needs to be thinking about that with our organization. It's not a quarterly scripted town hall. It's regular, face-to-face, even virtual communication. And the other is, inside of that cadence we're going to, even if you're distributed, when are you getting people together?

What does that, is that monthly? Is it quarterly? Don't think about the annual Christmas party get together. Think about, even if it's in smaller pockets, what are the, in this month, what team members am I getting together to, you know, visit a client in Austin or go to… a I'm hosting an off-site with 20 of our teammates this weekend, to go on a, a climbing trip, right?

Those sorts of, and distributed around the organization, many of whom have never been in the same physical space together right in the last year. And so, those sorts of regular touchpoints, pulling people together and trying to create that shoulder to shoulder bond, I think are going to be, more critical now than, than ever, because we're not going to suddenly unwind the changes of the last 12 months.

Stan: Yeah. I want to put a little spotlight on what you're doing, because you're going to have about 20 of our team members, many of whom haven't seen each other for almost a year and a half, they're going to be in West Virginia. They're going to be rock climbing. That's not something McChrystal Group does as part of our business in terms of that skill, but it builds confidence in people, but it also builds relationships.

There will be jokes. They will be stories. They will be sinew. And the fact that you, the president of the company, are hosting that, sends a pretty powerful signal. And so, I would tell leaders as we hit this hybrid environment, the key is hybrid. It's not either/or. It's not binary. Don't fall in love with being distributed. Don't require everybody to be shoulder to shoulder every hour because it's probably not the right answer, but be very intentional about getting the value out of the technological part and those opportunities to get people together, to create those magic moments that they remember.

You know, why they, when people leave McChrystal Group, typically young people almost cry in their departure and they talk about the special moments with their comrades. And if you can create that, you've got something magic.

Chris: Yeah. If we ever want to put it to a rock climbing, only company I'll… different business model. But yeah, we observe and appreciate that when, when folks do leave your organization, which is, you know, natural and healthy and all those things, we'll we try to do a formal and appropriate sendoff, um, and we'll throw pictures up, you know, recounting their time at the group.

Almost all of those pictures are from those moments of, you know, here's this hike we went on together and Yosemite, here's this, you know, this experience we had together somewhere out there, sort of in the field, so to speak. It's usually not pictures of people, you know, getting out of an Uber at headquarters.

So, it's that mix between those, those two realities, um, and motivators, I think leaders can really be focused on. I want to go a little more, maybe personal here for a bit, and pick up a question around, the question was on ego. Talk about ego and leadership. When does it help? When does it get in the way?

I'm not a fan of, I don't like to use the word ego, but there's, because it has a lot of negative connotations. But even in our, our leadership seminar at Yale will challenge folks to say, look, there's not, there's not an ego-less, really effective senior leader, regardless of politics or industry. Because there's some sort of, I would consider it a drive and an internal drive gets people to want to really make a difference that can come across as, as ego if unhinged, but take that away entirely.

And it's hard to find a leader that has a significant impact, you know, from a, from a pacifist non-violent leader, like, like Gandhi, who had an ego, he was driven to make it a difference, to, you know, completely unhinged egotistical leaders that that can create very caustic environments. So that's sort of a framing, but, I'm curious how you've looked at that over the years as well.

Stan: I think it's something that we do need to think a lot about. And I've certainly battled with my own ego like I think most other people have. I think on the good side ego is that thing that makes you adhere to certain standards. You say, these are my values, these are what I'm going to do, and therefore I hold myself to a standard because I want to believe in that idea of me.

On the other hand, ego's a real trap because, particularly in today's world where celebrity and self-confidence is celebrated, we see on the, you know, the cover of business magazines, sort of this stalwart CEO who has all the answers and has no flaws in their lives. And we doubt that it's true. But, but people try to, to give that projection.

My own battle with ego, you know, as you become a very senior military officer, people start laughing at your jokes, they start preparing and they start literally cow towing, and you want to play the part. And to a degree, you have to play the part of a responsible leader, but it's tempting to play the part of Alexander the Great reincarnated, and that's of course not true. And then when… if you allow that persona to become confused in your own mind with yourself, when you have moments of reckoning when you're wrong or in my case, and when my career ended suddenly because of a magazine article, you go through this real question of, “Am I real? Was I, was I real before? Am I real now? And, and what about me is genuine?” And so, I think that if you start early and you, you really force yourself to, to think about what's my role, what is my contribution? Not my title, not my pay, not, not any of those things, but what is my actual role? And am I doing that? Am I living up to that? And I think that's a, a good check. And then of course, if you've got grandkids, they're good. On the one hand, they're good for you to go in the other hand, they'll bring you right back down the road.

Chris: Yeah. I would highly recommend a 12-year-old daughter. Yeah. Yeah. She'll come through that door any minute and tell me to keep it down and she's trying to sleep. But yeah, I think you touched on the military piece. We could do a whole other discussion on that. Maybe the difference between military leadership and civilian leadership - where it's similar or different in that sort of great person status and what it can do to you.

The short answer is more similarities than differences, I think. Because we're all human. One of the, with that transition, you talk about, just brings to mind a conversation I have regularly with, with peers or, or friends of peers as they transition out of the service. I've been out for almost a decade now. So, I'm more as equally civilian as I, as I was military. Um, but I do tell folks, and I'll admit it to them at a time like this, this will sound a little bit esoteric, but you've been in the service for 10 years, 20 years. You went through an Academy. So, it's been, since you were 18 or

22 or wherever, that was, since you've been in an unconstrained environment, right? You've been following these rules that have made you successful. And if you're in SOF or your aviator, you know, maybe you're kind of a rulebreaker, but it's still a very structured system down to the, the clothes you wear to work every day, and how you cut your hair, et cetera.

And you're about to, and you've learned how to, how to present confidence and an ego in that environment to survive with all these other really alpha personalities and high threat environments. All of that's about to get taken away from you. You can't wear the uniform anymore, right? You, you, no, one's going to call you sir, or ma'am anymore the way they did in the service, and you're going to be left with this uncertainty about who you are, right? Because you put on this, I'll sometimes call it like your, your emotional body armor. You know, you've had this whole other layer of personality that you've built around yourself to make you, uh, an appropriate fit into that tribe.

And the tribe is about to say, I don't remember who Chris is, right? So you've got to go figure it out on your own, who you are. And some of that will force you to really challenge the ego side of things that got you to where you were in the service. And I think people in, in the corporate space go through very similar transitions when they go from one company to another or one position to another.

So it's a, it's a good, uh, reminder and way to check in constantly.

Stan: Chris, let me throw one on the table that a conversation between two former military guys, both males, uh, don't typically have, and that's on diversity because the reality is when we joined the service. A lot of the ideas of diversity was sort of hammered out of us or send it off on the edges.

You were taught to think the Navy way or the AArmy way. And you were brought into the ethos of certain organizations and your behaviors were modified so that you were as much like the other seals or the other Rangers as possible. And now we have an appreciation that diversity is, is important. Not just because it's right and it's fair.

But because it's valuable. How do you think about that now?

Chris: Yeah, it is challenging coming out of the military because when you, I mean, it's changing and the military has been in my opinion, sort of a progressive thinker in this space, historical and any social change and special operations, especially is, has been thinking deeply around diversity in the force for, you know, the majority of the time I was in there. So, from the early 2000s on, for different sort of tactical reasons, as well as, effective teams in different environments, but that, that doesn't necessarily set you up for the outside. Because again, it's this, it's this constrained sort of thinking inside of a rule set.

It's a hugely important issue. No one disagrees, no, logical thinker disagrees with it. The challenges to get there are, I think generational, right? And so, I think as leaders, our responsibility right now is to accept this is going to be hard. It has to be a consistent challenge. We've talked about this before. Like it's one of the challenges that that is going to outlive you. And so, you're going to take more steps back than you do forward on many days, but you have to continue continually push toward what we think right will look like that's going to be solved by the next generation of leaders or the one after that.

And so I think what we're doing right now, societally and in this organization and in industry in the military to a certain extent is trying to set conditions for that next, next generation. And we do that by who we, who we pull onto the team, how we, how we conduct our recruiting and hiring, who we try to retain on our team and promote up to great that next generation of leaders. How we create mentorship networks inside of our organization.

We try to leverage network analysis inside of our small organization to try to really think through who's connected with whom and are we grooming these people up effectively? Cause we all are guilty of homophily, you know, birds of a feather flock together.

And so, we will naturally look for mentors and peers that, uh, look like us and have similar backgrounds. That's just in the DNA of humanity. And so, you have to try to fight that tendency as leaders of an organization and create diversity of connections at a very young age, in professional young age.

But all of these are hard by none of, none of this is coming naturally to organizations. We know the outcome is, is critical. It's the right thing to do. It's important for society and well led diverse teams perform better. That's a measurable metric. Because they bring a different idea set, different angles on, on ideas to create unique solutions, poorly led diverse teams, can be counterproductive, right?

So, there's a leadership challenge in there as well. But I think, I think the takeaway, at least what I try to challenge myself as a, as a leader every day is this is, this is what we have to do. This is part of the, the task of our generation of leadership is to constantly live into this challenge and try to set conditions so that we're, we improve it as much as we can and let the next generation move the ball even further.

Stan: Yeah. You know, it's come to me sometimes, just comes down to the things I think are the habits I have might not be right. And that's kind of shocking because they're what you've been taught. There's what you studied there, what you've done. And I learned that in Afghanistan and Iraq, I mean, you are fighting against people who are as committed to their cause as you are to yours.

And then you realize that had you had their life's journey, you see things exactly the way they do. And so it, we're not necessarily correct in our view. And it's the ability to, to let loose of that a bit. That's key.

Chris: Yeah. The best analogy that I've ever seen as there's many out there, obviously on, but on this sort of challenging your thinking about maybe I'm not right, or maybe that was easier for me or fill in the blank is the, the latter and the rubber band analogy.

Right. If you are, if you have the type of, of background that historically would have set you up for success. Imagine yourself climbing a ladder, and you've got a rubber band tied to your, to your waist. And every time you slip it kind of, it pulls you up a little bit. And if you come from a different sort of background that doesn't have all those unique advantages from, from the day you were born, the rubber band goes the other way.

Every time you slip, it's going to pull you down a little bit. So, you have to, you have to fight even harder to get up. And it's those micro examples that you have to, you know, as a 48-year-old white male from a special operations background, constantly challenge yourself to think about, you know, is this a moment where the rubber band caught me and pulled me up a little bit?

And if I was, I came from a different background, but I've just lost a rung or two on the ladder.

Stan: Chris, why don't we wind this up with one question and of course I get to throw it to you because I jumped on it first. What's the most difficult moment as a leader, If you, if you ever sat back and said that was the moment I either was unprepared for it, or it was just so difficult that it has stayed with me forever. Do you have one of those?

Chris: I probably have too, too many. Yeah, it's a, it's a great question. I mean, I'd love to hear your thoughts on it as well. Obviously. I think it's, I, I, at first, I would say you really, I try to avoid those moments. Right, and not like put my head in the sand.

I try to build a team around me and create communication structures and transparency, et cetera, that can help you avoid those pitfalls. I think when the hardest moments I've had as a leader have been times when I was younger and didn't have the understanding of how that was thinking, you know what you're talking about, thinking, you know, the environment and then you get in there and realize you're way over your head.

There was sort of epiphany moments of, I can think of an example from, from the military where, where an advisor that was on your staff, who really understood Pakistan. And I presented this sort of, I won't go into the details of the case, but this sort of theory in special operations that we had about what was our, our work in Afghanistan and how the Pakistanis saw that and the tension between the two and this person.

You know, new Pakistan up and down and spent years there had family there and he sort of laughed and said that couldn't be more accurate. Like I wasn't the senior decision maker, wasn't going to drive strategy, but I thought, wow, if I was a three-star general, right now I'd be driving policy. And he explained the Pakistani version on that.

It wasn't 10 degrees off. It was like nonsensical what I was saying from their perception. And so those moments as a leader, when you think it's the confidence walking in saying, I know what's going to happen next. And then realizing, wow, I was completely wrong on this, and I didn't do my homework. I didn't have the right team around me.

I didn't listen well enough. Those are the ones that really, really can scare you as a, as a leader. So, I think the only way to prevent that as building the team, listening to the team, and then also anticipating and forecasting am I about to make a significant decision that. I could be completely wrong about, um, and asking others around you to challenge your thinking.

It's one of the ways to avoid that, that major pitfall. That's the one that keeps me up at night.

STAN: Wow. Yeah, I would say that. When I was, uh, in my final tour in Afghanistan, as we were crafting a recommendation for President Obama on what to do going forward, the war was almost nine years old. It wasn't going well.

There wasn't an easy or good answer. And we came up with an analysis that said we needed to reinforce with more forces and do certain things. We knew it was going to be politically contentious. And I was in that funny position where if it was going to have any chance of being accepted, I had to basically sell that argument to President Obama and the people around him at the same time, quite honestly, you know, I had my doubts. I thought it was the right thing to do, but I thought there was a high probability of failure. And so, I found myself in that situation where I had to articulate it and I had to make the point, if I showed too much doubt, it clearly was going to guarantee that it wouldn't be accepted at the same time.

I knew that there was a probability, it wasn't right, or it wasn't going to work. And you end up with this, or at least I ended up with, this sense of tension. And, you know, I can live with what we did, but I realized that so many times in life leaders are put in a position where there's just not a good, there's not a comfortable course of action.

There's not a right or wrong left or right up or down. And then it's just lousy and lousier. And, and how do you deal with that?

CHRIS: Yeah, that's that just as, maybe as a final comment, I think that's one of the, it's a better way of beginning and what I was, I was articulating or trying to the, um, the uncertainty.

We'll tell our students that in our grad class, you're, you haven't really experienced leadership until you have to choose between three bad options. And there's no one else that's going to make

the decision. That's when you're a leader, right. And that can happen in military and industry, et cetera. Um, and I just finished a, uh, a book by a friend on, on al Qaeda and the life of, uh, bin Laden and recounts, which has been told another in other books as well, Obama's decision to launch the bin Laden raid. And what you see is a room full of very seasoned, experienced, incredibly experienced leaders. Parsing the question down, I give it 30% odds. I'm 70%, but they're able to change it to 20. And finally, Obama who probably in that room, life experience and leadership experience was, was the newer member.

But he finally drew the line and said, okay, stop with the numbers. This is 50-50. We either go or we don't go. And we're not really sure whether he's there. We're going. Right. That's sort of decisiveness that nobody else in the room was willing to. And then in the, in the records will show, a lot of folks who are on the fence that, "Well, I kind of support, I guess," since he made the hard call.

But it is, it is those moments, when you, as a leader have to say, we're not going to get any more information. We have to make this decision and it's, it's 50 50, we're going to do it, or we're not going to do it.

Stan: And, you know, it's, although probably not as dramatic. That's where so many leaders are today. We're coming out of COVID-19. Everybody says the future's going to be this. Guess what? We don't have a clue. We're not sure where the economy is going, where the geopolitical situation is going. Whether COVID-19 is in fact suppressed or not. We don't know what's going to work best in the structure of organizations.

We are going to feel our way along. And, and leaders are gonna make decisions with less than perfect information.

Chris: Well, yeah. And a close on that note, the, uh, that I think every special operation force tries to say that they coined the term, but the mantra, "Run to the sound of the guns." You know, it is in those moments of chaos, which is, we're all sort of in the middle of, uh, teams and the leaders that move quickly into the problem.

Are going to come out on it the fastest, and they're going to find opportunity in there that they don't know exist yet. And in those moments, if you put your head in the sand or you. Or you say, I need on that 30%, I need more information. You'll often get time left in a week. So, I think speed is your friend right now.

Well, great discussion, really appreciate… thanks to everybody that sent in questions and we'll do this regularly. These are these, these are really fantastic sessions to get our wheels spinning and know what's on your mind. So we look forward to a next episode here on *No Turning Back* and thanks for joining us.