

[music]

Paul Thies:

I just wanted to fly fast fighter jets, and serve my nation, I was on fire for that, who wouldn't be? Although it wasn't easy, that purpose, allowed me to stay focused, not

learned several things from my grandmother and grandfather, but one was you always respected your elders and this was an elder who would size me up and said it wasn't college material.

The other thing was we're at a point where we were on welfare, to be quite honest with you, and we were eating soup and sandwiches for dinner, my mom had a job working 311 and I said, "Okay, she just laid it out for me. I'm not going to college." Nobody in my family have ever been to college and I said, "I'll get a job and perhaps maybe my sister who's seven years younger than me will be the first in our family to go to college," and probably about two, three weeks later, my mechanical joint teacher, a guy by the name of Dr. Clarence Hill, happened upon me very casually asked me, Bruce, where are you going to college, so and so it's going there?

The University of South Carolina, so and so it's going to this other place, where are you going? I just told him, I said, "Hey, look, I just spoke to guidance counselor and she said, I'm not college material, and so I'm going to get a job until my sister could maybe go to college." He said one thing at that point, and he said, "Do you mind if I call your mom?" Now, 31 years later, when I pinned on three-star general and became the Chief Information Officer in the army, he flew to DC, and of course, he'd been tracking me and he and I had been talking.

He followed my career, but he flew to DC to be there in person to the ceremony, and I had never asked him this, I asked him, "What did you tell my mom when you called her because my mom was there?" He said I remember calling her and said, "Listen, Miss Crawford. I've been watching this young man since the 8th grade," because I wanted to be an architect growing up. I tell people before there was the internet, there was this thing called World Book Encyclopedia. All grandparents had them for some reason, and so World Book Encyclopedia, I wanted to be an architect, and I took my mechanical drawing from him since 8th grade. He says, "I called her and said, Look, a couple of things, I've been watching this kid since 8th grade, I watch how the other kids respond to him." He had served in the military and he was working on his PhD at a little small historically black college called South Carolina State University in South Carolina.

He said, "Miss Crawford I want let him go with me in the evenings I'd like to try to get him in college." Now, he talked to me about it being an engineer, and then he talked to me about ROTC, and many other miracles had to happen to make me a senior leader in the Army throughout my career, but the key point here being I took away two valuable lessons from that, I carried with me. Number one, you never destroy young person's dream before they have an opportunity to realize that.

The second one, just as important, it may more important, is that one determined leader can make a difference. This was a young man at the time with his own young family who could have very easily looked away, and I would've been statistics, no doubt in mind, but he chose to get involved at the time when I needed him most. Because I went to college, each one of my brothers and sisters went to college, and then all of their kids went to college, and my kids.

You could argue that this one young man at that time made a decision to get involved that changed the entire trajectory of a generation of people, and so I've carried that with me, this whole one determined leader, and I've always strived to be

that determined leader in mentoring others and inspiring them to be better than their thought they could be.

Paul: That's amazing. It's amazing why what one individual who decides to be present to the situation and they step into the gap that the impact that they can have and they may not even really know. He may not even realize what he meant for your entire family, your extended family. Now, Heather, and we're going to talk about September 11th in just a little bit. Obviously, in your career, that's something you're obviously very well known for, but you also served two tours of duty in Iraq, and can you speak to that experience? What it taught you about fostering teamwork and a culture of mutual accountability?

Heather: First let me say that everyone's experience in Iraq or Afghanistan were dramatically different, so many of us who served those were formative experiences in our lives. Here's one thing that I think ties all of us together, is that we don't mind doing hard things, and as a matter of fact, I believe that people need that hard thing to go do to find meaning in their life and to establish self-esteem and prove to themselves that they can, but we don't like to do practice breathing.

We talk about practice breathing in the air force with the meaningless training and so forth, administrative, that sucks the life and your motivation. That's not what I'm talking about. It does get back to that purpose and people don't mind sacrifices and they don't mind the long hours if what they're doing has meaning. If it's going to make a difference, so I think that is something that leaders can take away, is that they don't necessarily need to make things super easy although if you're looking for retention over the long term, you do need to understand how to balance the demands that you're making for your individuals.

They need to be able to balance and actually be present for their families and so forth, but when we're asking them to do something hard, we need to articulate why it matters. We need to give them meaning behind what we're asking them to do, and then you would be surprised. You're just shocked at what people are willing to do

and how excellent they perform, because people thrive on doing hard things.

The other thing that's really interesting about that is when you create teams to go do that, then increases trust, increases commitment to the organization, increases

accepting the risk, if you're not in this particular case, the person who has others who are depending on you to stay alive and or be successful, so there's a little bit of that also.

Paul: That willingness to be present in the moment. Bruce, now let me ask you obviously 34 years in the Army and you retired as a three-star general. I'm assuming there were a myriad of commands and directions that you had to give in your role. What are some of the hardest decisions you've had to make as a military commander?

Bruce: I'd say virtually every one of them had to do with people, either their life or their livelihood. Given the fact that my passion's really inspiring people to be better than they ever thought they could be for the reasons that I talked about earlier, and that stayed with me even here in the industry and in commercial America. I'd say virtually, I'd be a hard decision had to do with people. Looking back I'd say when something did go wrong, and it wasn't necessarily a decision, but it was reflecting on a decision, it was, did I prepare them? Did I do everything within my power to prepare them to create an environment where they felt competent and confident and trusted what they were seeing?

Did I do everything that I could when something did go wrong to prepare them? It's everything from, as a second lieutenant as a young officer, having to be the first one to call a family and tell them that we'd lost a service member. That wasn't a decision, but it's something very difficult that I had to do. Losing a soldier in my 700 men and woman group of paratroopers in the 82nd Airborne Division in Ramada. Thinking back, although not a decision reflecting on what could I have done differently as the battalion commander to prevent that from happening.

I'd say every hard decision that I've ever had to make had to do with people. It wasn't about strategy, it wasn't about resourcing. It had to do with people, and I suspect that if you poll a group of leaders, almost all of them, as they reflect on it, I wouldn't say they come to the same exact conclusion or they come to very similar conclusion.

Paul: A lot of what you've articulated they're not things that you necessarily planned for, it was like, these are things you're having to react to, how did you prepare for those tough moments? What did it teach you about contending with uncertainty or fluid environments?

Bruce: I think Heather mentioned it earlier, is first and foremost awareness and understanding a couple of things. One of that leading is a privilege, that helps you prepare. The other piece that's more important, it can never be about you, and as the leader, when you have something very difficult to prepare for. I think you've got to do other things. In fact, to your question about preparing for tough moments, you've got to be honest with yourself about your own individual strengths and weaknesses. What am I good at and what am I not good at?

Then you got to surround yourself with people who think differently than you do, and who are good at the things-- Again, for the good of the organization that you are not. I used to run the strategic leader development program for the Army back in, I think it was 2010. One of the cool things as an example we got to do is we got to go visit

CEOs of companies. I never wrote this down but to this idea surround yourself with people who think differently and may be smarter than you all.

I heard the CEO of McDonald's in a very small room say that if you always find yourself having to be the smartest guy in the room, then you're probably hiring the wrong people on your team. The point being that one of the things that you've got to do to prepare for top moments is you've got to be honest with respect to what you know and what you don't know. You've got to fill that void with people who do know and be comfortable in your own skin there.

I think the other thing I've mentioned is you've got to be authentic, and it's not something you can just go do. Being an authentic leader is not just something you could read about and then just go do it. It's got to be a part of who you're and what you stand for. The last thing I'd say is-- one of the last things here is trust. We talked about trust. Trust is the bedrock. It's the one big thing about the one big thing. The ability to trust each other.

I think being authentic is one of those pillars that leads to building trust. Then the last thing I'd say is when you're dealing with tough moments, you've got to prepare in such a manner that you've made practice harder than the game. Meaning whether it's leveraging technology to put people under pressure situations. I know Heather, in her past life, they did that like nobody's business. A lot of the rest of, I'd say both Corporate America and the military modeling themselves after ability to leverage technology like fighter pilots did, put them in tough challenging situations early on. That last piece would really be about make practice harder than the game and put people in challenging situations before they have to actually go and do it.

Paul: Excellent advice. Now, Heather, I mentioned earlier besides your tours in Iraq, you of course are known for taking to the air in an unarmed fighter jet on September 11th under orders to bring down United 93 before I could reach Washington, D.C. Can you speak to what that experience as well as the TORS in Iraq, but that experience. What it taught you about finding the courage to act in a highly stressful situation?

Heather: Paul, I've already spoken, which I think is probably the most important element, is having that purpose that's greater than ourselves. Having clarity about what that purpose is. There's a difference between uncertainty or trying to seek certainty, which is predictable outcomes, and having clarity. We need to have clarity in what our purpose is, and we need to be committed to that. It has to be so much bigger than ourselves.

I think one thing that's really important as I've spent time reflecting on September 11th over the past 20 years, is that the kind of courage that I think we saw that day, and not just in the passengers of Flight 93, but the first responders and the people who helped each other, and the moments before the tower fell, and how people just took care of each self on that day. We saw examples of everyday courage. I've come to think of courage like a muscle.

If we don't exercise it on a daily basis, when the moment comes it might be too daunting for us to lift. We might not have the internal strength and integrity to rise to the occasion. I think that what that means is in our daily lives, when it comes to being

brave, overcoming our fears, putting those fears to the side, that we do the right thing, overcoming our insecurities, our self-doubt. That we practice that bravery and we practice service on a daily basis in the small ways, in the small things. Only then when our moment comes will be ready.

Paul: This next question, Heather you, I think it might be the tactical application for

Heather and Bruce, I want to thank you both so much for being with me today and talking about this. I want to also thank you both so much for your service to our country.

It's amazing what you both have been through and what you've done for our country. I want to thank you both for that and for sharing your insights with our listeners today.

Heather: Thank you, Paul. This has been great.

Bruce: Well, thank you, Paul. This has been unbelievable. Thank you.

[music]

[00:33:14] [END OF AUDIO]