

- You are listening to the HR Mixtape, your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought provoking interviews and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel, well, like work. Now, your host, Shari Simpson.

- Welcome back to another fascinating series on the HR Mixtape. This week, we're taking a different route. We're diving deep into the battlefield of leadership lessons, the real life experiences that have honed the medal of our exceptional guests, individuals whose foundations are built on courage, integrity, and dedication. In the spotlight are three distinguished military veterans, all who have made the transition from serving our nation to guiding others with their invaluable leadership insights. Prepare yourself for a week packed with narratives that embody resilience, camaraderie, strategic thinking, and many more principles that aren't just limited to the barracks, but echo throughout every aspect of our lives. Kicking off the series, we have Dan Kopp, veteran of the US Army. As founder of theleadingbuffalo.com, Dan helps others foster their leadership skills as he continues to lead like a buffalo amidst life's toughest storms. Then we'll hear from the commendable Mark Kohler, a veteran from the US Navy. A renowned speaker and leader. Mark shares his wisdom on markkohlerspeaks.com, inspiring others to lead with authenticity and purpose. Finally, closing out the week we have the dynamic Ryan Davis. Another incredible US Navy veteran, Ryan imparts his wisdom and experience on takeflightleadership.com, providing tools and guidance to help leaders take flight and soar in their personal and professional lives. Each day will be a new exploration of leadership, resilience, and determination from a unique perspective. You won't wanna miss out on this exciting series, so grab your notebooks and tune in this week to get inspired and empowered to unlock not only yours, but others' around you leadership potential. Dan, thank you so much for jumping on with me today.

- Well, I appreciate being here and I'm honored to be present. Thank you.

- I'm so excited about your background. For those who've been listening for a little while, they know that I have sons that are in the military. And of course your background and your value on leadership was really impressive, so I'm glad that we're able to sit down and talk about this because I think that valuable leadership and especially stuff that you've learned in the military can be of great value to the HR community.

- Absolutely, leadership is everywhere. It's what drives the world. We need leaders and I'm here to tell you everybody can be a leader.

- I love that. So as you've looked back on your military career, you know, what are some of the things in the leadership lessons you learned from that service that have really informed your work in the

private sector now?

- I think the biggest thing is take care of your people. That was always natural to me, but it was really ingrained in my psyche to take care of those around me, whether it's direct reports, the organization, people above me in the organizational chart, our customers, our clients, whoever you're serving, just take care of your people. And that is something I definitely had reinforced in the army.

- Yeah, for sure. Has your leadership style changed from military service to corporate life? Obviously, those are different contexts, obviously, but I'm sure there's lessons you pulled through and ones that maybe weren't as applicable.

- Yeah, I think so. I don't know if it's because of the vast difference between military and to public education now into the corporate world, I think it's just a natural evolution of leadership versus a change in environment or a change in the industry in which I found myself because I think... I don't think I was different than a lot of leaders where they're trying to figure out who they are as a leader. And we sort of latch on to other leaders around us as mentors, role models, whatever, even though it is not something that's natural or comfortable for us. So I think my evolution occurred because I matured as a leader, not because I change army to public education to corporate.

- Yeah, you know, it's interesting when you look at those that you value as leaders. Somebody gave me this advice long ago is like, never take advice from somebody you wouldn't trade places with. And I think that's so true in your personal and your professional life when you think about leaders and looking up to leaders that there is a sense of trust that you put in leadership, that they're doing the right thing and making the right decisions. You know, you have a concept that you like to talk about called leading like a buffalo. I'd love for you to elaborate, what does the metaphor represent and how can HR leaders kind of adapt that?

- Well, leading like a buffalo is the name of one of my companies and when we developed the name of the company, it was a no brainer that it had buffalo in it because be the buffalo is a metaphor as you suggested. And it's basically, as the buffalo exists on the Great Plains, when they see a storm coming, some turn tail and run. If you can envision a storm going the same direction as the buffalo, they're not gonna get through it very quickly. But a lot of them charge it. And when they charge the storm, they get through it quickly. And I might point out that be the buffalo is important. So it's about addressing things in front of you that need to be addressed. Especially in the HR world where you run into countless situations that if you don't address it, you're in essence condoning it, right? Or you hope that it goes away and that never works. So everybody who's

listening to this can put themselves in this situation because everybody's had to have some type of uncomfortable conversation with somebody, whether it's a loved one, coworker, boss, a direct report to a colleague, whatever. 99% of the time, the dread leading up to that conversation is worse than the conversation itself. So be the buffalo, address things in front of you that need to be addressed and get them behind you. I've been accused of liking confrontation. I hate it, absolutely hate it. I just like it behind me better than I like it in front of me.

- It's so interesting when you think about anxiety and fear is you have that all in anticipation of the thing, but so often when you get to the thing, the fear is gone, the anxiety's gone, you embrace the moment. Is there tactics that you talk about that can get us to that point faster?

- Well, there's a lot about mindset. I mean, we've got to build confidence and regrettably, it took me 30 plus years of being in leadership positions in those various organizations that I didn't learn to be confident until 2018. And fast forward to now five years later and that's exactly what we do in our leadership company Leading like a Buffalo. We help other leaders learn to lead confidently so they don't have to wait 30 plus years to do it. And when you're confident, it doesn't mean you know everything. It doesn't mean what you are about ready to do is going to work, but at least you are confident doing it and you're not afraid to act. I almost said second guessing. Good leaders by their nature second guess themselves all the time. I do it all the time, but at least I'm confident when I act, even though I second guess myself on the back end. So it's about building confidence and that's exactly what we help people do. And when you build confidence and understand your skillset, your abilities, you're better situated and able to address the things in front of you in a manner that is comfortable for you. It's not about me trying to lead like you or you trying to lead like me. It's about me leading like me. And honestly, that's one of the things I learned in the military is no one can lead like somebody else. I spent a career realizing I couldn't find a good leader to emulate, but I found bad leadership all over the place. That note to self, when you're a leader, don't do that. Doesn't mean I know what I'm doing. I just know not to do that. But then if you think about leadership is unique to the individual, that's why it's hard to learn from other good leaders. So I help people understand who they are, what their skills, what their attributes, what their values are. We talk about why they have those values, not the whole Simon Sinek, what's your why? But literally, if family's important to you, why is it important to you? Once you have a deeper understanding of who you are and more importantly why you are that person, you become in better in tune with everything you can do. It builds confidence and it allows you to address the things in front of you that need to be addressed.

- How have you married that idea of knowing yourself and using kind of the tenets of situational leadership to make a better impact when you are encountering these diverse situations we experience in HR?

- Well, knowing myself, I can acknowledge that I don't have all the answers. So that's part of my leadership. I embrace other leaders around me, which just builds my skills. And I also seek diversity and opportunity. So not to, I mean, you could go out as a leader and have literally 1,000 different experiences and then the next day say, "I'm set, I've got 'em all." Then you're gonna encounter 1,001, right? We can never set ourselves up to experience everything, but the more diverse our opportunities and experiences, the more experiences we have, the better we are suited to address new things in front of us. Because typically, leadership's new every day. If you approach every day thinking, oh, I've done this before, let me do it again this way, that's a recipe for disaster because every situation is different. The people involved, the organization may have changed, the support from above you in the organization, the expectations of the org. All that goes into every situation is different. Just because you've encountered somebody who's done X before, it's a different person, different spot in their career. Maybe the organization's changed since the last time you addressed it, whatever the case may be. Situational leadership is huge 'cause no two situations are the same because of a myriad of reasons.

- Every time somebody brings that up, I think of that scene in "Jurassic Park" where he's dripping the water down her hand and it goes a different direction every time. And it's just such a good visual to remember. There is so many variables that change. I mean, it could even be somebody's mood that day. They had decaf instead of, you know caffeinated coffee and it changes everything. So it's such a good thing just to keep in our back pocket to remember that.

- Right, right. And with being the buffalo and addressing things in front of you, there's two key components to that. You have to have the requisite knowledge to address what's in front of you. You just can't go in blindly. Plus you have to have your emotions in check. So when you're addressing something, that sort of implies negativity, right? You're addressing something that needs to be addressed. There's some negative something around it. But if it's at such a level that you've got your own personal emotions that are heightened because of that, whether it's disgust, anger, just downright less than happy, you've got to get those in check. And I've found myself delaying in acting on things over the years because I've matured enough to realize that I need to make sure I not only know enough to address this, but also have my emotions in check. I had an instance, I don't know, five, six years ago where I had two leaders who directly reported to me. They had a very public interaction that was very negative. It was over quickly, so it was so quick that I didn't even have time to react while it was going on. They parted ways. I wanted to address it then

and there, but I knew that I was so unhappy that nothing beneficial was gonna come from that. Plus I didn't know what to say. Fast forward 24 hours, I had figured out what to say, addressed it with them when my emotions were in check. That night, both leaders called me, don't remember what they said other than we put it behind us. We talked, we realized what went wrong. We were wrong for how it played out. It's behind us, we're good. But had I addressed it on the spot, that would not have been beneficial to anybody.

- Well, and that's why practicing mindfulness and knowing where you are in your emotions is so important. You know, I think sometimes, sometimes people think that practicing mindfulness is very woo woo. I don't know a better way of describing it, but it's not. It's really just knowing yourself very well to be able to take that step back and say, "Hey, you know what? I actually need to cool off first before I address this." And there could be a myriad of feelings. That's just one example, you know?

- Yeah. And just being conscious of where you are right now. Like what are your emotions, what's your knowledge? Overtly and consciously think about those things and that will bring you to a better spot.

- Yeah, you know, as somebody who's an author, you wrote a book called "The Power of Me Leadership." And in that book, you talk about nine tenets for every leader. I'm wondering if you could give us a brief overview of these principles. I don't want you to actually tell us your whole book 'cause if you're listening, you should go get it. But that being said, what can you share from us about that book that you have found so successful?

- Here's the book, and it obviously has a buffalo on it. Why would it not? A buffalo with an attitude at that. So I initially wrote the book as sort of a self exploration of my journey and sort of said, here's how I figured out who and more importantly why I am the person I am. And this is how I'm wired. These nine tenets sort of are underneath everything I do and I subconsciously approach things in these manner. Once I've read the draft my time out, this isn't about me and my journey. These are just good tenants. Couple that with the idea of everybody can lead well, which I mentioned in the intro, and everybody has to lead as an individual. So all those ideas play into be the buffalo. So how I'm the buffalo is going to look differently than how you are the buffalo. But at the end of the day, we can both do it. Another tenant that I love talking about is take care of your people. I mentioned that from my army days. Well, I'm gonna do it differently than you're gonna do it. I met with an executive director of an organization. He had 42 employees and he was barely keeping his head above water and the organizational flow just with managerial tasks. So we were talking about leadership and I said, "This tenant, that tenant, take care of your people, all that." And I could see, he was just like sinking in his chair and-

- Overwhelmed.

- Yeah, he was. I said, "All right." He said, "Where do I begin?" I said, "This isn't an all, like you don't implement everything I just said tomorrow." But it happened to be a Thursday. I said, "Tomorrow's Friday." I consciously and overtly spread the love on Friday. It's about connections, building new ones, taking care of old ones, reaching out, spread the love, right? Reaching out to people in your network and just checking on people. I said, "I guarantee you," and they happened to run a small bakery coffee shop through this nonprofit. I said, "I guarantee you've seen one of your people out working the counter, upselling." They did it when I walked in. And that's something you are treating their customers well. They treated me well when I walked in. I said, "I guarantee you saw something that was great this week." Well, I did, I saw... I said, "Go past her tomorrow morning when she's got a lull in the action. Say, hey, Wednesday morning at 6:30, I saw you treat this customer excellently, well done. Thank you." I said, "That's all it could take. That's a step in the right direction." He'd also mentioned every two weeks, they have a team meeting with the anointed leaders, even though they weren't officially leaders. He grabbed about eight people. And said, "All right, once every two weeks, we're meeting." I said, "All right, you already do that. At the first five minutes of that, go around the room and talk about accolades and celebrations, what went well. And at the same time, throw some blank note cards in the middle of the table. Hey, while we're doing this, grab some note cards, fill it out. You have a note of gratitude, a thank you. I'm thinking about you, I recognize you did well. Whatever, fill it out for your coworkers. It's gonna take five minutes out of your already scheduled meeting and that's a way to take care of people and it's gonna take you five minutes every two weeks." I said, "Those are two easy to implement things that you can do." Maybe it's a text, maybe it's an email, maybe writing a note and leading the meeting wasn't up his alley, but he could maybe send a text, maybe make a phone call, whatever. So taking care of your people is a general tenant. I talk about where I learned that, but I also talk about how you could implement it. And at the end of the day we can both agree that that's an important tenant. And most people say, "Well, duh, of course." But if you talk to a lot of small employers or an HR director who's responsible for an organization with 500 employees, it's easy to forget about that when you're talking all the managerial tasks that come with being a director of 500 employees or leading an organization and you're the CEO, CFO, HR director, whatever, all in one for 50 people, forgetting that people exist, that's easy to do. So I'm just here as friendly reminder and every Friday on LinkedIn, I remind people to spread the love.

- And it's so true for the HR community. We often don't spend time celebrating our success.

- Oh, yeah. You know, we launch a program, we launch a project, and then we're like, okay, that's done. Let's move on. And we don't spend that time sitting and going, you know, this really worked well and this person was really pivotal in the success of this program. Let's celebrate them in the work that they've done. So I love that idea of using Fridays to do that. And what a great way to kinda end your week and maybe stave off some of those Sunday scaries that they talk about.

- Friday's my favorite day of the week because of spreading the love. I mean, I make contact with people in my military days, current coworkers, colleagues I met in my last career like every Friday. That's what it's about.

- I love that. You know, as you've worked with different leaders across the country. Have any of them come back to you with stories or is there anything memorable from a success story-wise that you could share with the audience that, you know they took some of these tenants and implemented 'em and it had X impact in their business?

- Yeah, absolutely. I had an IT professional in his 50s reach out to me, oh, a couple months ago. He had read my book and he said, "Out of the blue, my boss's boss said, "You are now moving up. Your current boss isn't cutting it. You've shown in the last couple months that you are worthy. You are now the regional director for the east coast for IT for this major bank in the country."" And he said, "I simply read your book and implemented the strategies or the tenants and consciously thought about your tenants as I was interacting on a daily basis. And my skillset rose to the level of acknowledgement from my boss's boss." And he got the promotion. And he had never consciously done anything other than, I'm an IT guy and I'm gonna go around and make sure things are running right. I had another person reach out to me, she's a retired lieutenant colonel from the Army and I've known her for years. She said, "I thought I knew leadership well I know it better now." And she's still a nurse practitioner, so she's a practicing nurse practitioner. She said, "I learned stuff in this book that is going to make me a better leader, and I can implement them tomorrow." So I know the help I give people is impactful and I'm helping build confidence in leaders because I don't have the answers, but I can help people figure out they've got the answers within them and it's that confidence builder that's so important. And that's what many people are lacking. Even a 40, 50 year old person who's been in leadership or been in an organization for 20 plus years, they're still lacking confidence. I was there! I lacked confidence. I finally figured it out. And it's not that hard to figure out, but people need that extra push to realize they've got within them the power to be a good leader.

- What advice do you have to HR leaders who are working with that C-suite who maybe can see that there's confidence lacking? I mean, beyond just like putting your book obviously on their desk and being

like, "Hey, maybe you should read this." But I think we are in a really unique position to help our C-suite continue to evolve in their leadership. Have you coached any HR professionals?

- Yeah, I have. And at times, it's this the old lead by example thing. First of all, as an HR leader, director, you've got people beneath you in the organizational chart. You can enact these tenants and in essence, lead by example. Another way to approach it is most organizations have some type of cabinet meeting, executive leadership meeting, some type of structure in place where similarly situated directors get together and discuss typically management in nature, but they discuss the organization, what program, what project, what initiative, et cetera. I've had people successfully address with the C-suite people and the president, CEO and say, "Hey, let's incorporate some type of professional development in these already scheduled meetings. And you know what, I'll lead on the first one." And then all of a sudden, they can demonstrate what they're doing through their own lens, through their directorship, and sort of lead by example at the C-suite level to show people this is how it's done. And that has snowballed into others taking turns or the HR directors continuing to do it, whatever the case may be. But it's a lot easier to say, "Hey, let's share this knowledge we have," versus a boss, "You need some leadership skills. You know, can I train you?" Or, "Here's the book, better yet, here's his number, call him. He'll come in and do some organizational training for you." Because that'd be a good tactic too. I'm just saying.

- Yeah, yeah, for sure. You know, and in that advice, you said something that I think is really important that I wanna highlight is adding something to an already existing meeting. If you're working with a leadership team, that is such a key important point because they don't want something else on their plate. They have a lot of stuff on their plate. They're already in sometimes decision fatigue with their roles and what they have to do. So if you can incorporate it already into your routines, I think that's a great idea.

- And here's an easy way to do it too. Like how many people, executive level people have offices that are associated with the people lower in the organization, right? They're in the same office building. Like put on your calendar, get off your butt and go out amongst your coworkers, just saying hi to them or walking around. If they have an office, checking in and say, "Hey, I know you went to the ball game the other day. Did you have fun?" You know, something as simple as that on the way to the water cooler. Say hi to somebody, know their name and ask 'em how their weekend was. I mean, it's that easy to start down the path of taking care of your people and being a human being in their eyes.

- Yeah, I appreciate that, Dan, and appreciate our conversation today. Thanks so much for spending a few minutes with me today

- This has been great. I appreciate the opportunity, so thanks for having me on.

- I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at thehrmixtape.com. Come back often and please subscribe, rate and review.