— 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.

— Joining me today is Ryan Davis. Ryan is a 20-plus year retired naval officer with 4,000 hours of flight time encompassing multiple deployments in support of combat operations around the globe. His most recent assignment was as the commanding officer for Patrol Squadron 47, a P-8 squadron responsible for executing the nation's maritime strategy. During that tour of duty, Commander Davis led his team of 300 sailors through organizational cultural change resulting in the highest morale on record across all VP squadrons, being awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Association Leadership Award and earning the Battle E Award for efficiency. Ryan is the founder of Take Flight Leadership, an organization helping individuals and companies achieve their goals. He's the author of "Take Flight: Cultivating Culture Through Trust, Teamwork, Purpose & Ownership." Ryan, certified as a SHRM Senior Certified Professional, a Resilience Building Leader Program Trainer, and as a BCSP Associate Safety Professional, all to better help him serve the teams that he works with. Ryan, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today.

— Absolutely, thanks for having me, Shari.

— So you have lived a life I think many of us could only dream about, flying missions around the globe, leading a squadron of hundreds. Now you're leading your own business. I'm curious as we get started in this conversation, what's been your biggest, quote unquote, pinch-me moment so far in your journey?

— Yeah, I've learned a lot about myself over the last 24 years in the navy. And what I learned is that I love helping people, love helping teams and organizations. And so, I'll purpose this with, I'm a father of five, I've been married 19 years. And so, I have plenty of pinch-me moments as being a father and a husband. I think that's my main role. But professionally at my time in the navy, it had to be my experience with VP-47. It was a command or squadron that I got to be the commanding officer for. I can tell you, it's a long story, but the organization was in a bad place. We had two commanding officers that got fired back to back for personal misconduct and they were just the tip of the iceberg. It was a squadron mired in management misconduct and malpractice. Our culture surveys indicated that we were in the bottom in morale, communications and leadership. And when I showed up to the squadron, I can tell you that the second order effects of our toxic leadership, they were really astounding. We were the worst performing squadron. We had sailors being discharged for attempted murder, dereliction of duty, fraternization. We had sailors routinely assaulting their spouses. It was just a bad place and my heart was broken for our employees, for our sailors, for our teammates, because

VP-47 was not what the navy had promised. And with three sons in the navy, I know you know exactly what that promise is. And I fear that our squadron wasn't battle-ready and if I could explain that, it's just simply if a worst-case scenario were to have occurred, I truly felt that our team would run from the fight. It'd runs from the danger instead of running towards it. And something really had to change there. And something did change. And in less than two years' time, the employees, the sailors at VP-47, took collective control of their destiny. And their efforts ranked our squadron as number one in morale across all three employee categories. Going back many years, as far back as the culture survey would look, the odds of being number one in all three employee categories were over one in eight million. And I was so excited to get those results in our culture survey, just the organization transformation. But the real pinch-me moment was when I got to round the whole team up and brief and present the results and to say, "Hey, look what you guys did, number one in morale, all three employee categories." It was just a really pinch-me moment. It was fantastic. But it was never about being number one in morale, it was really just focusing on our culture and being number one in morale was a symptom of our culture. So that, by far, had to be the pinch-me moment, was just letting the team know that what they were doing was working and that was fantastic.

- I'm sure there are so many HR professionals listening to this that are getting goosebumps as you talked about kind of the state that was before you guys decided to really work on yourselves and be the people that you become. We encounter that so much in the HR spaces, employees not having that buy-in and having the kind of culture that they want. You wrote a book called "Take Flight" and it really emphasizes the importance of cultivating culture. I'm curious your perspective in this kind of fast-paced tech world, how do we make sure that we're creating culture or that we're cultivating culture, not just creating it or not just checking a box? I mean, you could have definitely gone into that command and checked a box, right? And it doesn't sound like that's what happened. No, we're always creating a culture by our actions, our words, our deeds, our focus. How do we cultivate a culture is you really have to be intentional about it. I have a cup right here and I feel like this cup represents you, it represents me, it represents everybody that you work with, everybody you know. And the purpose of this cup is to be full and to be poured from. And when we're serving our purpose, we're fulfilled. And when we're not serving our purpose, when the cup is empty, we fill empty. And I think that in America, at least, most of us come to work with a full cup on Monday and we pour from that cup into our organization, our coworkers, our friends, our bosses, and we leave work with it a little less full than when we came. And we're trying to recharge that cup during our time off with our family, our hobbies, whatever it may be. But it tends to be that the cup continues to kind of get lower and lower and lower throughout the work week. And for some people, it gets empty and we have nothing left to give. And I would say that's kind of the current

model, the state of America and employment organizations. And I reject that model, I don't like that model. I want to work at a place where we come to work and the cup gets overflowed at work. I want to work at a place where I can't wait to get to work because I want that cup to be filled. I don't need to save any of it and when I get to work, I can pour freely of that cup without worrying about saving it for when I get home for my family. And so, I know that sounds like a crazy vision, but that's how I always thought, that work should be for our people. And so, I think one of the main problems that we have at work at any level is we view our decisions as supporting one or the other. And when I mean one or the other is mission accomplishment or morale, right? There's so many things. It's people or profit, what comes first? And the reality is they're really directly linked. You can't have one without the other. They're both required. And so, it reminds me of an interview I participated in where a peer of mine asked the interviewee this question, what's more important, mission accomplishment or morale? And as he asked this question, I was scratching my head, sitting next to him, and I thought about it and I said to myself, I hate that question. I can't stand that question. Don't make me pick between mission accomplishment and morale because they're directly linked, right? Show me an organization that can't accomplish a mission, can't make a sale, turn a profit, can't keep customers or investors happy, yet has sky high morale. I don't think that organization exists. And then conversely, show me an individual that shows up to work every day and gives level best 100%, but doesn't feel as a valued member of the team, doesn't understand the organization's purpose and doesn't feel opportunity for growth. I don't think that person exists. And it's because mission accomplishment and morale, people and profits, they're directly linked. And when we view our decisions as supporting one or the other, I feel like so many managers, it's a balancing act, right? How do I serve my customers? How do I ensure we're having profits and take care of my people all at the same time? And when we view our decisions as supporting those things, then we lose sight of the bigger picture. And sometimes we actually can confuse our employees. And so, I think my thesis is this, that culture is king and when organizations place culture as their number one priority, everything else falls in line. When culture becomes number one, then mission accomplishment will go up and with it, morale or morale will go up and with it, mission accomplishment. And I think that when that light bulb turned on for me, that's when we were able to make some big changes at VP-47. And so, my thesis is culture is king and every organization is different. But what worked at VP-47 was trust, teamwork, purpose and ownership. That was the secret sauce to our culture there and we focused on that quite a bit.

— I suspect that going through that change, that you had people who resisted it, people that maybe you had to have tough conversations with. How did you really articulate that? That ownership that they needed to take on themselves to embrace the change. And the military

is obviously a little bit different. There's a chain of command and there's some things that we don't necessarily have in the corporate world, but I think the tactics are probably the same. How did you approach that?

– Yeah, absolutely. I'll address both kind of two questions there. And one is that our stories may be set upon the backdrop of deployments, flying aircraft, working in a hanger, but the interactions at 47 aren't unique because they're human interactions. They really take place at every organization. We didn't come up with a better way of flying aircraft or invest money in the business, we just simply focused on basic human needs. So I would say that the model can work for any leader at any organization anywhere. And then, you talked about people who resist change, right? That's going to happen everywhere. People fear change, right? And I can completely understand why. I've been there before myself and I think communication is key. But before communication, there needs to be trust. That's the first aspect of any winning culture and any winning team is really trust because I mentioned before that we have this cup and we want to fill it up at work. But the reality is without trust as employees, we kind of have this filter on our cup and we won't let you pour into our cup. Even though that's the purpose, we won't let you because we don't trust you. What do you want in return for pouring into my cup? That's what we think, right? You could offer everybody in your organization free college for all their kids and they'd be skeptical about why you're doing that, right? I don't want that, I want to know why first, I want to know more, right? And so, I think President Roosevelt said it best when he said people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care, right? And so, earning trust is really about showing care. When I think of trust, three words come to mind, character, competence and care, right? All three things and I think the one that we struggle with most, especially as leaders, is care. And so, when you show people how much you care about them, when you get to know them and you understand their needs, their wants, their desires, their aspirations and they know that you care about them, I think they're willing to listen. But that's easier said than done, right? It's easier said than done for sure. And I will admit that we had people in the organization that lasted a long time without wanting to change. And they could see that, fortunately, the organization change around them. And I think what they saw was it changing for the better. And finally, the light bulb came on. There's no amount of communication, no amount of trust that would allow them for you to fill that cup. It wasn't till the people around them started opening the cup and they said there was nothing, there's nothing required back to fill this cup, they just wanted to fill the cup. So it's a challenge for any leader, for any organization and it's a difficult one for sure. But I think it starts with trust, which starts with care and then effective communication after that, just to tell them the reasoning behind the change.

– And if you're a leader listening to this and you think you've tried that, here's my challenge to you. Have you been authentic in pouring into the cup or did you actually create a tit-for-tat? You expected something in return. I think that's a trap we can fall into as leaders, is say, "Hey, we've done all these things, but your words don't match your actions or vice versa." And so, people see that stuff.

– Absolutely, I think my advice to leaders would be don't give up. I gave up when I was younger. I'd say, "Who wants to be on the team? I want you to be on the team." It was an open invitation. "I want to get to know you. Here's my bio. Here's what makes me tick. Let's have a meeting, let's talk about each other. Let's do a potluck, let's do all this great stuff." And there were people that never got back to me with their bios. There were people that didn't show up to the meeting. There were people that didn't really accept my invitation. And when I was younger, that bothered me, right? I thought to myself, well, this person doesn't want to be on the team. They clearly don't care about being on the team. And so, I kind of moved on without them. It was a team of people who want. If you want to be the team, like you said, the military is a chain of command and I think in the private sector is the same way, right? You have a chain of command and there are rules and guidelines or contracts that you have to abide to. And I can lead through the contract or I can lead through trust, teamwork, purpose and ownership. The choice is yours whether you want to be on the team or not. And as I got older, and really through my kids, this is a unique story. My daughter told me, she asked me, "Dad, what pajamas should I wear to school tomorrow?" It was Pajama Day, okay? I said, "Hazel, it doesn't matter what pajamas you wear, they both look great." And she said, "No, dad, it's really important because there's a winner for best pajama. And so, I really want to know which one you think is the best." And I'll preface this with my daughters and this one in particular. She's an amazing student, athlete, person. She wins all the time, right? And so I told her, "Hazel, doesn't matter which one you wear. You're not going to win the pajama contest." And she said, "Why won't I win the pajama contest?" I said, "Hazel, people like you win all the time and your teachers know that and you don't need a victory, right? The pajama contest are for people who need a victory, right?" And my son, who's two years younger, she was 10, he's eight, shares a room and the poor guy, his older sisters, three older sisters, are such fantastic athletes and scholars that sometimes he can get discouraged and he doesn't realize it's because he's younger. And so, he looks at me and says, "So dad, the pajama contest is for people like me then," is what he said and it broke my heart. It broke my heart because my kids play basketball on the street. My son's kind of the youngest of the kids that play on the street. He gets picked last in basketball. Sometimes he can't make the ball into the basket. Kids make fun of him and he just quits and goes inside. And what I realized is that over time, I think if you have an employee that you feel is not ready to accept your invitation to be on the team, it's

because they've been hurt by previous bosses, by previous coworkers, and they don't want to open themselves up to being hurt again. And what I learned was that everybody wants to be on the team. 100%, everyone wants to be on the team. And so, what you have to do is understand that and never give up. Never give up, right? You're going to lose so many battles, there's going to be so many times when your folks push you away, but the reality is you just got to stay consistent because they want to be on the team, I can promise you that. You just got to stick with it. Sorry, that was a really long answer.

— No, that was—

— It's one that's personal

— to me.

— That was a great answer and I think we all have those examples of where we've seen things come to life. So I love that example. You have, as part of your HR leadership coaching, you have a program around resilience building in leaders. And I'm curious how you think about resilience playing into that role of cultivating an effective organization.

— Great question. I can tell you that as I retired from the navy, I took the certification course, Resiliency Building Leader Program Trainer is I guess my certification. And it was a really great experience. I just finished writing the book, "Take Flight." And as I thought about what was most effective at building a winning culture at VP-47, it was trust, teamwork, purpose and ownership. And as I went through the curriculum with my coach for this certification, their framework was almost the same. There's four sections. It was trust, teamwork, purpose, and then it was learning. And as I went through the learning section, I thought to myself, wow, it's the same thing as ownership. It's just packaged differently. Learning and in particular, are you learning organization, right? And I think if you think about it, ownership and learning are kind of run hand in hand. When you come across a problem, do you think about how to solve that problem or do you just so what we've always done? Do you just do what the boss would want you to do or what he told you to do last time? Do you just do what the organization did last time this problem occurred or do you really think through it and learn? I think that's the difference. That's the final step in a winning culture is, are your people really taking ownership and critically thinking about the problems that arise or in this case, are they a double-loop learning organization where they really think about how to solve problems? So it's just kind of packaged a different way, but I was a complete believer. And to be honest with you, the resiliency is a byproduct, is almost like morale is a byproduct of that culture, right? Profits is a byproduct or mission accomplishment of that type of culture. And I think resiliency

is a byproduct as well. When you trust that the organization has your back, when you really enjoy working with the people next to you, it results in meaningful relationships. And when you understand your purpose, it helps you become a resilient organization. So resiliency is important, but I really think that resiliency is a byproduct of these other things. And so, it's not something that we necessarily need to focus on, it's something that will just naturally come with a great culture. As somebody who had a really successful career in the navy, I'm curious, why not go career? Why not stay in the navy? Why come out and do this leadership coaching thing? And I mean, maybe those listening are assuming, well, it might be the five kids. But I'd love to hear your transition from navy to civilian and the work you're doing now.

- Yeah, there's a bunch of reasons. And I can tell you, it was a natural leap for me. I told you a bit earlier that I love helping people, teams and organizations. And so, it was a natural leap for me. When I got our team together and talked to them about us being number one in morale, we were all pumped up and I quickly brought us back to Earth and said, "Hey, our goal was never to be number one in morale. That was never our purpose. It was a byproduct of our culture, our byproduct of putting each other first and take care of each other." And I only asked them to bring the lessons learned, the magic at VP-47, to their following organizations, 'cause as you know, in the navy, we're constantly changing organizations. And I didn't want that magic to be lost or to stop at VP-47. And for that reason, I don't want it to be lost at VP-47. I wanted to bring it out to everybody I could bring it to. And then in the navy, you get you get aged out of being in a squadron. A squadron, a ship, a submarine, those are teams of about 300 people and it's fantastic being on one of those teams, but that was my last opportunity. Once you're a commanding officer of one of those, you move on and you work on staffs, Pentagon and budget, acquisitions, policy, those types of things. And that's just not my strong suit and I wanted to do something that I really enjoyed. And then, of course, yes, a big family. It was time to stop moving them around. My oldest is 16, my youngest is three, so a big split there. But I told you in the beginning, my most important job is being a husband and father. And so, it was a great leap for me, I'm super happy.

- I love that. As we wrap up our conversation, and I was looking through your bio in prep of our chat today, you had received this award. It's called the Navy and Marine Corps Association Leadership Award. And I'd love to hear what it meant to receive that and how that's influenced your approach and your work with Take Flight Leadership. I'm going to downplay it because it didn't affect me much, to be honest with you. Really it was the number one in morale thing that I think impacted me the most. But I mentioned it just a moment ago, it was a byproduct of our culture. We ended up winning the Battle E. The squadron won the Battle E. And once again, it was just a

byproduct of our culture. Our goal was never to win the Battle E. We didn't go around and pat each other on the back and say, "Hey, we won the Battle E, that's fantastic." And a lot of organizations, that is their goal because it signifies the best squadron. And it was never our goal 'cause our goal was never to be the best squadron. Our goal was really to focus on culture. And there's a lot. I told you, trust, teamwork, purpose and ownership. And I do want to talk about purpose just for one moment before I let you go, instead of talking about this silly leadership award, because your sons are in the navy. And I think in the navy, we have the ball cap ceremony where recruits officially become sailors. And a lot of them cry, right? Lee Greenwood's "Proud to be an American" is played over the loudspeakers and you can literally see the short hair standing tall in the backs of our sailors' necks. And they're pumped because the navy is communicating at that moment that they're going to be on a team that makes a difference. They're going to be serving a purpose larger than themselves. And I think that this is true in many organizations. It's definitely true in the navy. But unfortunately, a lot of time passes by between that ball cap ceremony and when we get to our first organization. And when we get to our first organization, the narrative changes and no longer do we talk about our purpose, the service to people, service to others, the American people, and in particular, people who can't help themselves. We talk about you, right? And I think a lot of organizations make the same mistake. We talk about your personal progression throughout the organization. How do you achieve, right? We actually have a name for it in the navy, it's called the golden path and the golden path is all about you. When I showed up to my first organization, we were told to qualify quickly so we become instructor pilots and that would open the door for the best jobs in that organization. And those jobs would be your ticket to get the best evaluation reports. And those reports were your ticket to choose where you get to go for your next duty station. You know the model because you have sons there, right? And we're always told to go where was best for our careers and that's the golden path. And I really wish collectively our golden paths were like the golden rule, that we would just love one another. Treat people the way we want to be treated. Show up and qualify quickly so you can help the people behind you qualify quickly. Get a great evaluation because you invest in your teammates, not because you outperform them. Choose where you go next based on where you make the greatest impact or where your family will thrive. I think our confused narrative results in too many selfless sailors, selfless employees leaving our organizations and I think we ought to focus more on the golden rule instead of the golden path. Focus your team more on service to others instead of service to themselves. And I think that what you'll have is a cup that starts to overflow more often. And so, I'd rather finish with that because I think it's such an important aspect of what we did at 47. I think it's an important aspect of why I won that leadership award because I saw our purpose as that. We refocused collectively our focus from ourselves to outer, to our teammates, to the people to the left and

the right and the people that we served and I think that was probably most fundamental in our team doing so well.

— Well, Ryan, I am definitely inspired by everything you shared today and I'm sure our listeners are as well. So thanks for taking a few minutes of your day to chat with me.

— Sure, it was a pleasure and thanks for having me.

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