

- You're 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 Marc Koehler. Marc is the founder of the leadership development firm, Lead with Purpose, author of the award-winning book, "Leading with Purpose", and host of the "Surfacing Leaders Podcast." He teaches organizations how to achieve, both collective and personal leadership readiness, through Fast Attack Leadership and E3 Cultures. A former US Navy nuclear submarine officer, and turned around CEO, Marc turned his one million in training and 35 plus years of leadership experience into a program that was forged by the sea and tailored for the land. Over 46,000 people are now using that program to create engaged, motivated and successful leaders at every level that are empowered to make decisions at speed in this new disruptive world. Marc, thank you so much for jumping on with me today.

- Oh, I appreciate you having me.

- So, I am obviously super excited to talk to you. For those that have listened to the podcast for a while, they'll know that I have three active duty sailors and your background as a US Navy nuclear submarine officer is very near and dear to my heart. So, I'd love if we could start with maybe you talking about a little bit about that experience in leadership development and how that helped you transition from Navy life to leadership consultant.

- Yeah, thanks, and thanks for your boys for serving and thanks for you serving too. It can take a toll on a family, so appreciate that.

- Oh, thanks.

- Yeah, so in 1986, this small movie came out. It's called "Top Gun"-

- Just a tiny one.

- Just a tiny bit. I was a junior in college and encouraged me to go into the recruiting office in Buffalo, New York to become a jet fighter pilot. And I went through all the tests and I'm waiting there in the room at the end of the day, and they say, "Hey, you have one more test "that we gotta retake." And I was like, "Well, what? "Did I not see the horizon right or whatever?" And they're like, "No, your thigh bone right now "is three eighths of an inch too long "to sit in a jet, in a cockpit."

- Wow.

- And so the recruiter was like, "You gotta put your butt as hard

against the wall. "We're gonna seat you down." I think I put a hole in the back of the wall. Anyways, got it down to within an eighth of an inch. And I was disqualified from sitting in a jet. Now, as the door's hitting me in the butt as I'm leaving the recruiting station, the recruiter says, "I see you're studying mechanical engineering and physics. "You ever thought about being in the submarine force?" And I was like, "No way."

- Right.

- He kept after me for two months, being a good recruiter that he is. And when I learned that it was second only to MIT's engineering program and how hard it was, I was like, "Hey, I think I wanna give you that shot." And so I joined the nuclear submarine force. For the first two years I was on land and they have us on land before we even get to the submarine and got stationed out in San Diego, California. I mean, at the time, I think, Shari, I don't know if I was too young or too naive to understand the environment that I was a part of and was exposed to. But I was 24 years old, driving a billion dollar submarine around mission's critical to national security. 110 men, average age 23 years old, how did we do that?

- Yeah.

- And so for me it was just this fantastic experience. One of the things that I didn't love is that we were out at sea 85% of the year. So, I knew that wasn't gonna be the long-term lifestyle for me. So, I got out and I took a quick stop at Honeywell, loved the training at Honeywell. It taught me professionally how to read a profit and loss statement, put together big company strategic plans and a bunch of other stuff. What was really frustrating was there's a big 32,000 person company. Silos, and hierarchy, and decision making. And I was used to 110 people, and like we failed our way to success. So, when my children at the time were eight, six and four, this is 2005, I could either climb a corporate ladder or beat every back to school night in choir performance. Chose a ladder of those two. And I just stepped off and started doing strategic management consulting and I fell into doing turnaround work. And what I can share with you is that in the first couple of opportunities that I went that I went into, I went in like a bowl in a China shop. I was like, "Hey, 400 people, the service of the ocean. "I was a strong leader. "How is this gonna play out on land?" And what I can share with you is that I had some failures and when I look back on it now is it was really in and around. I was trying to take the tools that I learned from Honeywell and climb to this business. And frankly, I almost killed them, because they were too wiely and too big and forced to take a look elsewhere. I just went back to my time in the submarine force and what I was able to see when I peeled everything back was what was the key to being successful. And it was that everyone was highly engaged and highly focused and we were connected to a common purpose and a shared vision.

And one of the mottos that the submarine force has is, either we all come to the surface or no one does.

- Wow.

- And I was like, how do we create that on land? How do we create that? So, I just took a bunch of tools that we had used in the submarine force that were really simple. One of them was a one page captain's orders. Everybody could look at it, big picture mission at the top, what my individual department's role is and making it come true. But I can see in the collective how we're all helping with the mission. And I just came back and went to the team and said, "Hey, let's create a one-page captain's orders." And it was amazing what happened. Amazing, 'cause what happened was they were able to see clearly how what they were doing is connected to making a difference in the world and they had that common purpose. And they started then sharing that with all the other employees in the company. Engagement levels went through the roof, feeling part of a team, feeling belonging. And the same exact team that was failing three to four months earlier, became highly successful with a single sheet of paper. And I was like, "Wow." So, what I can share with you is that a couple companies that I attracted thereafter were also very dysfunctional. And so I started with a one page captain's order there. And then what I did is I brought the meeting structure forward from the submarine force. That turnaround went great. Did another one recognition system, that around great. Did it for about a 10 year period. And people came to me and said, we think you have a framework. I know you have a lot of satisfaction and you feel like you're serving others by helping four to five companies turn around in a year. What if you could help 400 to 500 companies, use the framework that you've developed? And I said, that's what I want to do. And so created fast attack leadership and it's based upon these three key principles. Number one is we crave simple meaningful messages. Number two is attached to every single one of our souls is the wanting to belong to something bigger than ourselves. And then number three is we get excited knowing that we've been given autonomy and we've been recognized for that. And so what I can share with you, these are deep human needs, Maslow's Hierarchy-type of needs. And we created the entire framework in and around that. And that's how Fast Attack Leadership came about. And that's the impact that we're making in the world.

- You know, just listening to those three if I walked into an organization and they shared those with me at the very beginning, even in the interview process, like these are the things we value. I'd be so on board. Like just those three things, if you're listening, if you have a version of that in your org, the impact on that, right? Especially that connection to the work I do to the outcomes of the business. So, many organizations miss that connection point that you end up feeling like a cog in the wheel, instead of somebody who's actually part of the mission of either the mission in the Navy or the

mission in your organization to be successful. So, what a really cool way to simplify the concept and some of the things that you've learned to pull it through to corporate America.

- Yeah, yeah. It's been fantastic. And I had those same things. I had times where I was assuming that people when I was a turnaround CEO hey, I see the big picture, I see the mission, I see what we're doing. And I was assuming that, Susan understood that too. And doing that was just, we know about what we say about assuming, make sure it's really, really simple and clear.

- Yeah, you have another part of your program, called E3 Cultures. I'd love if you could dive a little bit about that is and share some examples of companies that have successfully implemented that model.

- Okay, so initially we started off in 2015. I wrote the book "Leading With Purpose." And in there we described what an E3 Culture is. And here's what it is. First of all, first off, the thing you have to do as a leader is you have to get people engaged. So, you have to show them how what they do connects to making a difference in the world. People are either gonna be attracted to that or you know what? Maybe they aren't. And maybe there's an opportunity where they can go somewhere else and feel attracted where they feel fully engaged. So, first is engage. Have to do that first. And here's why. Once you open up a person's heart, they have a lot more opportunity that they're gonna invite discipline into their heart. So, a lot of times we go in as leaders and we go, "Hey, let's put this process together, "let's put this dashboard together "and you gotta type this in. "All this stuff." And they're like, "I don't really care about my job." And so I had that happen to me. I went into a company, Warrior Manufacturing Company. That's what happened. Put a huge process together. They were having 18% returns. The bottom line, I was like, let's put a process together, 12 steps, I'll get them included and everything. After six weeks, nothing was happening. And then finally I was standing there one day and a piece of thin wire was going across one of the machines. And outta curiosity, I just went up to the operator and said, "Hey, where's that wire going?" And he's like, "I don't know?" And so I call Armando, "Come over here, Armando, come over here. "Armando, where's that going?" He goes, "That's going to Terumo Heart, "That's going into pacemaker." Like Shari, I could literally feel the operator's shift like, "Oh crap."

- Yeah like, this is really important work I'm doing.

- Yeah. Went to the other machine, big coaxed wires, eight wires together. Where's that going? He goes, "I don't know." "Armando," Armando comes over, "That's going on the deep submergence vehicle. "It's gonna go on the Mariana's Trench." I could feel that person shift. And you know what? I did that, I did that for the next three weeks. Returns went from 18, mind you for six weeks, returns were 18%.

They went down to 16% with my fancy process. Did that for the same amount of time, went from 16% down to 3%, 'cause everyone knew how the wire, we connected the wire for them. I assume that they understood it was gonna go in the robotic arm of person coming back from Afghanistan. And so it's about making that connection and making it clear, making it simple with how their specific product, connects to impacting another human's life. And so that's the engage piece. And once you do that, you open up people's hearts. Second step is empower. They're excited. They're running around. They're like, "I love my job. "I want to do more stuff." And now, because they care about their job, they're gonna go above and beyond on their own. They're going to do the work that they need to do to learn what they need to learn. That's when you can push decision making down. And for leaders today, the highest levels of burnout are happening at the top level. And it's because they're still in an old command and control type of hierarchy. And they're still feeling they have to be involved in every single decision. And so what we have to do is once we get open up their heart, we have to push decision making down that allows the leader to work more on the business, less in it. And it's been shown that empowering people actually engages them, because they say, "Oh my gosh, "Shari's allowing me to do the things that she used to do. "And she's trusting that I'm doing that." So, that's the second piece, is empower. And then the final, and the third piece is encourage. So, you've opened up their heart, excited about what they're doing, they're doing great work. You've pushed decision making down. Now, it's about you as a leader being a coach and mentor and a teacher. How are you giving them the resources that they need? How are you recognizing them? How are you making sure you show that you care for them? So, that's the encouraged phase. And so those three phases are really key. And what I can share with you is that we had a series of tools that were in and around that. And only in the last three years did we really highlight that these are the specific leadership skills that you need to have. And that's been dubbed Fast Attack Leadership. So, if you learn the Fast Attack Leadership skills and you do these day in, day out, you're gonna be able to build over time in E3 Culture, which is the most competitive advantage that you can have for your company, because you got everyone fully engaged and aligned. And there's all these things in and around having purpose and resiliency and retaining people. You can go on and on and on. Gallup's got a lot of those.

- No, I feel like we could talk forever. And those listening, I'm sure have a ton of questions they're thinking about to ask you in their heads. What I find so interesting is, so many times in leadership, we think it's this very complex process and it's usually just a couple simple things we need to know, do them on repeat and make sure that we are highlighting those underneath us. That idea of empowering those underneath you to make decisions. I have been in plenty of organizations where that hasn't happened. And the organizations that get it and do that, you can feel it in the room. You feel the

ownership of the people who are making those decisions. You talk about, obviously you have a book called "Leading With Purpose" and you talk about purpose a lot, how do you talk to leaders to help them understand that connection to purpose, like if they're not bought in to the purpose of an organization that's gonna show up in their leadership style for sure.

- So, you're saying that the leader of the company?

- Yeah, like, or those that are either the leader of the company or those that are in leadership's position, if they don't have if they don't feel purpose in what they're doing, that's gonna translate down.

- Oh, oh, absolutely. You can say all you want, "Hey, I love purpose." And if you don't fully believe it yourself, it's gonna show in a lot of your actions. I mean, here's just some shocking statistics for you. Besides Gallup, what we do is, when we are working with companies, we've done this with over 400 companies now. Upfront, we give the leadership team a piece of paper and we're in a room where their mission statement, their values and their vision and their top three annual goals are not there. And we say, without talking to each other, you have 10 minutes to answer these questions. Simple Shari, what's your mission statement?

- Yeah.

- What's your vision? What are the top five values of your company, right? And what are your top three annual goals? Clearly, it's consistent. We ask them also how aligned do you think you are? On average, the average leadership team of 400 teams that we've done, they believe that they're 68% aligned. And then when we have them take that test, guess how aligned they are on those four key things?

- Oh my gosh. I would say they're probably closer to 15 or 20%.

- Yeah, less.

- No way.

- 9%.

- Wow.

- 9%. And Shari if you and I were gonna climb Mount Mount Everest, I'm not doing it if the team's 9% aligned.

- Right, right, for sure.

- Right, yeah. And so what what I learned early on was that the mission statement that's 42 words long has all these extra words in

here. I was like, when I was having that failure in that first company, that's what we had. We had a beautiful mission statement, no one could repeat it. So, then the versions got all crazy. And when we just had seven on the team, there were seven different ways that they were expressing the mission statement out to everybody. So, there's this diffuse message that was going out. When I looked at the submarine force, we tapped into symbols and we tapped into code words. And so what we say is like, there's one that had 42 words in it and then we just changed it to the symbol of a heart in capturing hearts. And we're gonna capture the hearts of our employees and capture the hearts of our clients. And when they retook the test, they got a hundred percent on that. And then the message went out clearly. And so what we really share with leaders is that big long mission statement that's not working anymore. You need a something that's very simple and clear that everyone can remember. And the use of symbols from the submarine force helps to unpack massive amounts of information and data instantaneously. And so we tell people after three months of going through the engage phase, 'cause we really focus on their message. We have them retake the test, the average team goes from 9%, the 93% and that's where we get the success from.

- You know it's the simplicity of it. I just, I love it all. I think this is where we're seeing, language in my world, around employee value propositions, right? You're seeing EVPs come out, because they look at things like mission, vision, values and they can't, your bottom line employees can't articulate that. Like, yeah, I know I work for a company that does X, but like you don't hear the passion, you don't hear the excitement. And when you can connect that EVP to that person's purpose and values, such a cool connection. So, I love that framework. As you have worked with leaders and you've seen technology change both in the military and in the corporate world, how do you see that being played into the work that you're doing and helping leaders think about leveraging technology, especially as we talk about AI and ChatGPT and all the other things that are out there right now?

- Yeah, that's a great question, because this recent shift with AI and ChatGPT, which everyone's talking about, it's just gonna continue happening. So, the disruptions of the world are gonna continue to happen. And so really there is technology that you can leverage. You should look at in your industry, what are the technologies that people are leveraging? What I can share with you is though I believe technology is not gonna replace the human being. And so what I believe is that you need to shift from what is a hierarchy framework. You need to shift to what we had in the submarine force and what's been expressed in "Lead With Purpose" and Fast Attack Leadership is, you need to shift to a matrix framework. You need to shift to a matrix. A lot of people think that the submarine was highly command and control and we certainly had that, but the captain of the submarine was involved in less than 1% of the decisions made every day, just operating, right? And allowing others to move and shift. And so I

think the biggest thing that people could lean into, because technology's gonna continue happening, you have to make sure that your team is adapting faster than the outside environment. So, that's what you have to make sure, certainly leverage technology, but it's about everyone at the company being a leader. And you know that's what people have to view. Everyone is a leader at the company. So, if you have 200 people at your company from the top all the way down the bottom, you have 200 leaders. And when you shift to that then you can shift to more, to a matrix framework. I would just share with you hierarchy, is the lines in a hierarchy framework are about control. They're about decision making, they're about status or more decisions are made at the top. Top levels of burnout are happening in the leadership team because they're still trying to ride the bicycle the old way they do. If you shift to a matrix, we got all these lines going back and forth between people. Leaders have to let go of that. They have to let go of that. And those lines though, they're not hierarchy, they're not control. What those lines are, their trust, their values, their culture, their respect, their culture. And so you need to shift to that. And so I would say shift to that first, pour into your people so everyone can be a leader and then obviously take advantage of technology.

- Marc I am so inspired and rejuvenated by our conversation, just hearing your passion and it getting excited about the things that I know that those listening can do with their leadership team. So, this conversation has been super valuable to me and hopefully to our listeners. I have one selfish question to ask you as we end our conversation. With two active duty navy sailors in the nuclear program, who I know are gonna be listening to our conversation, what advice do you have for those that are making that transition or potentially in the future gonna make that transition from military life to corporate America?

- The skills, the tools, the experiences that you had are invaluable. The top three traits that people are hiring people for, can you use a Word document? Can you use an Excel spreadsheet? Can you collaborate on a team? Can you adapt? Do you have resiliency? Do you have perseverance, right? Do you feel connected to a mission? Do you care about your other teammates? And think about what happened on the submarine. We had 110 people come from all different walks of life, melded together, bonded together. So, I would say those top skills, being able to adjust on the fly, they're gonna be gobbled up regardless of what they do. I know your one son is an electrician and but they can do anything, because people are hiring for values and training for skill.

- Marc, such great advice. Thank you so much for spending a few minutes of your day with me.

- Oh, well thanks for having me. I appreciate it. And again, thanks



for serving.

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