

EP 80 - Tom Kolditz: Effective Leadership Strategies in the Face of Uncertainty

Mitch Simon: Welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere where CEOs, leaders, and experts at building teams,

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: companies,

Mitch Simon: organizations,

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: and amazing cultures share how to lead from anywhere in the world. I'm your co-host on the east coast, Ginny Bianco-Mathis.

Mitch Simon: And I'm your co-host on the west coast, Mitch Simon. And we invite you to join us to Team Anywhere.

Today we're privileged to have Tom Kolditz, a retired Brigadier General who led the department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at West Point for 12 years. Tom is the founding director of the Ann and John Doerr Institute for New leaders at Rice University, which was recognized as the top University Leader Development program by the Association of Leadership Educators.

On the podcast, you will learn how to lead in conditions of uncertainty. We'll explore how to build trust, how to outwardly focus, how to reduce social distance and how to build hope. All skills that he wrote about in his heavily researched book, "Extremis Leadership". Please enjoy this amazing and rich podcast.

And in the house today, we have Tom Kolditz, who is in very cold Southern Illinois. And great to have you on the show, Tom. Welcome.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Welcome, Tom.

Tom Kolditz: Thanks. I appreciate it.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: So I'd like to start with the way we have been starting, at least in the past two years. This has been quite tumultuous, at least in the

general world. You, of course, in your world have had a lot of crisis that you've dealt with. What have you learned in the past two years?

Tom Kolditz: Well, one of the first things I've learned is that, I have a wonderful team that works for me. They have adapted to operating online, to the point where not only did we not have a drop off in participation in our leadership work at Rice, but we provided a professional coach to more than a thousand students during the pandemic. And we were able to see firsthand how human development protects people from some of the bad things that somehow develop when we're alone in our living rooms with our pets and not much more. So, it's been an experience for me, but one that's given me a lot of optimism because I've seen students who have done very, very well, during all this.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yeah, that is optimistic. Isn't it? That's fantastic. Well, I'd like to dive into your first book, "Extremis Leadership: Leading As If Your Life Depended On It." And it seems that book has a lot of parallels for what's happening to leadership today and wonder if you can talk about the premise and theme of that book.

Tom Kolditz: Sure. Well, you know, I wrote the book initially to help inform what we were teaching West Point Cadets before they would go to Iraq or Afghanistan with 30 or 40 of other people's kids. And I learned very quickly that the principles in that book apply to many other circumstances in our personal and our professional lives, when people around us are afraid or there's a lot of stress on them.

The book came out in 2007, just in time for the big banking crisis. Then I spent a lot of time in New York city at the big banks, talking to them about how to lead their people in the middle of this great uncertainty. And really the book is directed towards how to lead in conditions of uncertainty, because that's what dangerous circumstances are.

If you have perfect situational awareness, if you know where the enemy is, if you're on a mountain and you know what the weather's going to do, then it's easy to make the right decisions and it's not a problem, but that's not the nature of crisis. And consequently, a leader can't manage their way out of a crisis for the most part. They have to lead people.

Management requires facts and knowledge. So management's about policy. It's about resourcing. It's about, you know, all of those things that we do to make organizations functional. But when you don't have the answers, the only tool you have is trust.

Consequently, people who lead in dangerous places are very good at establishing a basis of trust with their people. So that's really what the book is about is, you know, how do you get to a point where people trust you when you don't have all the answers, and how can you do that consistently as a leader throughout your life.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Oh, fabulous! Which leads into an incredible follow-up question: What does that look like? Establishing that trust. And how, and what should leaders do not only during that banking industry, but then during this pandemic to build trust?

Tom Kolditz: Well, one of the things our research found is that leaders in general if they're inexperienced at crisis leadership tend to over-motivate. They cheerlead too much. And what we found is that genuine crisis leaders, people who do it all the time, are the opposite of cheerleaders. They're very quiet people. When they come into the room, everybody's arousal goes down, not up.

And so that was our first recommendation to people is, you know, don't be animated. Certainly don't be angry or frustrated. Be calm, be confident. It's how professional leaders do it. One of the other things we found is that having an outward orientation is very important. You can't think about yourself very much. And there's two reasons for that.

First, the outward orientation is a learning orientation. So remember now we're dealing with uncertainty. So if you're focused on the problem, you're focused outward, you're going to figure it out faster. Then, if you're focused internally worrying about what's going to happen and, you know, will it be bad?

And-

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And how it will reflect on me-

Tom Kolditz: Right.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: As a leader. Yeah.

Tom Kolditz: And then an outward orientation also tends to put people into their prefrontal cortex. That's where we have task orientation. As opposed to the amygdala, which is where people experience fear and anger, the fight or flight. So it's also the very best way for a leader to control their emotions and to understand how to control the emotions of their people.

Because if you are task focused enough, it makes it difficult to experience fear or anger. It just doesn't happen. And when we were talking to young officers and cadets, we would never tell them, you know, you need to control your emotions. What we tell them is, if you're afraid or you're angry, you're not focused enough. You need to focus. You need to focus on the challenge because the reason you're feeling that fear anger is that you are not.

And then I guess one of the last things we found was this notion of common lifestyle that when people are miserable or afraid as many have been during the pandemic, for example, they need to see you as a human. You need to reduce your social distance as a leader. Not be standoffish or certainly not advantage yourself by flying out to your Montana Ranch or something like that, you know, you should be there.

Just a quick anecdote. It was apparent to me that my folks were not feeling great about the pandemics, when it was driving us, when we were first closing down and going to-

So I sent each of them at my own expense, a stick of summer sausage. And it wasn't just any summer sausage. It came from a hundred year old butcher shop in my hometown of 1800 people. And I was able to tell them, Hey, this summer sausage is what I had in my Fred Flintstone lunchbox when I was in the second grade. And it became almost a joke, but at the same time, it was very humanizing for them to see me in that light. To picture me with a Fred Flintstone lunchbox with a summer sausage sandwich in it.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Oh, absolutely!

Tom Kolditz: So, you know, and it's like any other leadership, authenticity is important. So yeah, that's kind of where the book goes. It just talks about how to do things like that.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yeah. So can you share some more stories or a story about a leader that you might have been in array acting with over the last two years? Some of the things they have done that demonstrate these very things you've just been pointing out.

Tom Kolditz: Sure. I was the principal leadership consultant to a very large beverage company. Not Coke, but similar. One of the things that we talked about was the difference between the circumstances that the executive leaders were in, in terms of being able to stay home, and all of the drivers and distributors that were out there being exposed every single day.

And one of the lessons from "In Extremis Leadership" is a good leader share risk. You know, they don't advantage themselves and set themselves apart with greater safety and comfort. And so there was a little bit of a flurry of executives, showing up in blue jeans and flannel shirts, hopping into the right seat of trucks that were going to deliver, demonstrating to the people out there that, they knew and understood what it meant to work for that company during the pandemic. Because the food and the drink had to be delivered. And they were out there, the delivery people out there every single day.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Totally. So you're called in as a consultant, and that's a wonderful example that you gave of, Hey, let's just go into the trucks, and that just broke down so many barriers. Do you chat with them? Do you help them come up with the ideas? I'm trying to get at how they learn, how these leaders in the moment learn?

Tom Kolditz: Well, this particular company pulled together three of us. So one person was an epidemiologist who understood the science around the pandemic. And another person was a, she was a social scientist, not a leadership person, but just focused on the dynamics of work and that sort of thing. And then, there was me and we would have meetings about once a week with the Chief Human Resource Officer and other senior executives in the company. And we would talk about what the circumstances were, which of course changed every week.

They had all the background information about their company, about how the company was doing. There was some polling of people in the company and that sort of thing. And we did everything from make masking policies to, you know, interpret what the most significant leadership threat was, you know, internal to the company.

And we did that for about three or four months, and then we kind of disbanded because they were kind of like, okay, we got it now, you know?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yeah. But that moving it to action was probably due to the fact that they engaged in conversations with you, where you were part of thinking through, here are the things that you might do.

Tom Kolditz: Yeah. You know, it is all about action. One of John Doerr's favorite sayings. I quote him all the time on this. "The ideas are easy. Execution is everything." So we had to quickly move from, you know, ideas to, okay, what does that mean on the ground? The idea is that shared risk is important. What does that look like to a truck driver that's downloading bottles of soda?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: I was reading something the other day that talked about what should a leader do when things are so uncertain? You don't have the answer. So what do you do?

Tom Kolditz: Right. Well, it's important that leaders paint a way ahead for people, whether they know exactly how that's going to happen or not? It's important. You know, I think it was Napoleon Bonaparte who said leaders are dealers in hope. You know, that's really what a leader needs to do in the grossly uncertain-

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yeah.

Tom Kolditz: Circumstances. And there's been very good research done that shows that when people are afraid, they want someone who paints an optimistic picture of the future. They don't want a rationalist, you know, who's going to say, well, here is the probability of whatever. And they also don't want a person who's just emotional about it. What they want is a transformational message about the way ahead. We're going to get through this. Sun's coming up tomorrow. And that, inspires them and gives them hope. And too many leaders particularly those of us who were advised by attorneys and, you know, in other ways, too many people feel like, well, I can't really say something because I don't know for sure whether this is going to happen or not.

And that is unfortunate because people need the optimism and the inspiration. And they want, honestly, to be told what to do. They don't want a committee. You know, they don't want some collaborative solution. They want a strong leader, who's going to say, Hey, we're getting through this. And here's how we're going to do it.

You know, while I think all of us respect the idea of shared governance, or a more collaborative approach, that works great when things are going well. But the worse things become, the more people want someone in charge that knows what they're doing.

And far and away, the most important leader quality we found in our research and interact that's covered in the book is competence, the most important leader quality. Loyalty was also very important. And those two variables together is what built trust. Many other leader qualities were insignificant like courage or integrity or things like that.

Mitch Simon: I was wondering in terms of outward focus and focusing on the problems, you know, many cases, the CEOs really didn't have the answers. You

know, definitely paint a picture of hope. I'm just wondering what have you seen work? Is that the CEO says, hey I got the solution? Or the CEO is bringing in all of the people that are kind of involved in the problem to work on a solution together.

Tom Kolditz: Well, you know, it depends on the company but I've learned so much during the pandemic because prior to that, it was not unusual for, if I was speaking to a group of executives, one of them would say, well, what if the crisis isn't immediate? What if it's a slow burn?

But here we are two years into a pandemic and quite frankly, you know, many of our state and even local governments have not done a great job of getting us through this. We're going to have a million dead. A million dead from this pandemic. So it's a whole another level of slow burn.

One of the things we focused on was how important it is for leaders to touch people in ways that put them in their personal lives, to a degree that was greater than in the past. And I'll explain why that's the case. So, you know, we can say that if you focus at work, you've got tasks that you feel less stressed, you feel less concern and so forth.

But every one of those people gets into their car, and drives home with no task orientation. And the whole way home they're thinking bad thoughts about the future and what they don't know, and you know, all those other things. When people are absorbing that kind of stress in their private lives, that's where the company is going to start to be affected by somebody who gets a DUI, or somebody that slaps a spouse, or somebody that does some other manifestation of the stress that builds up over time.

So, leaders have to step in, make it clear that there is a personal dimension to this experience and affect it in a positive way. So I'll tell you what we did in our organization. About a month ago, we all put on masks and we went to a place in downtown Houston and we played Batu ball for the afternoon, which is something that I had never done before.

But I,-

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Right-

Tom Kolditz: I liked it. I was better at it than I thought I would be. But the ability to kind of pull people out of the funk is important. And you know, when I was in Iraq, I don't think I ever went into an armored vehicle, like a tank or an

infantry vehicle without seeing a Frisbee or a football or a set of horseshoes or something like that.

And this is, you know, dead in the middle of a combat zone in a foreign country. But, you know, soldiers don't go anywhere without the ability to step back when it's safe to do so and play around. You have to be able to do the same thing even in a serious crisis. As a leader, you just have to be able to take that team, and help them to put things into perspective and reduce some of that stress.

Of course again, if you're hanging out on your ranch in Montana, you can't reach out to people in the same way. And so setting aside the status differential for awhile, being there for people, it was always true.

I used to tell people that if you have folks crunching numbers all night long, you had better show up with four pizzas, wearing blue jeans and a sweatshirt. You know, that is a time when you reduce your social distance and you become one of the crowd. It's not something we do all the time as leaders. Sometimes a little distance is expected and worthwhile. Not when people are miserable, when people really need to be led by a human being.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yes. And, Mitch, to your point, when you're in a crisis, the leader who has been doing these things and building trust. See if you agree, Tom, that if the leader then stands up and says, Hey, right now, we're doing this. Everyone, do this. They will follow openly because you've built the trust, because they know later there'll be time to go around and talk and do a mortar board. And what did we learn from this? Et cetera.

I'm trying to deal with the fact that a lot of what we're reading today is, you know, get everyone's ideas. You can do that quickly and then say, here's the decision. For today, it's not a democracy.

Tom Kolditz: Right. In some respects, there's an even higher level of that, where the leader doesn't even have to be present, and people know what they would want done in the pandemonium, and they do it. I had a great conversation at Duke University with a guy named Jack Bovender, who was the CEO of Hospital Corporations of America. HCA. Which at the time had about 12% of the hospitals in the country.

One of his hospitals, Tulane University Hospital, was evacuated during hurricane Katrina. And the evacuation was highly successful, and went very well for the patients and so forth. And Bovender had almost no communication

with them. He had a little bit of email. He couldn't talk to anybody on the phone because all the phones were down if you recall. And I asked him, how are you able to exert this influence that got them to do the right thing when you had so little communication?

And he looked at me and he said, you know what? I couldn't become in 30 minutes what I hadn't been in 30 years.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Oh, I love that.

Tom Kolditz: This notion of understanding crisis leadership has to inform how we lead every single day.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yeah.

Tom Kolditz: Because you can't stop and say, okay, now there's a crisis. Now, I'm going to lead this certain way. It's too late.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And now let's switch on what you're doing at Rice, and you and I had a fabulous discussion. And given all your studies, you decided to work on and measure cognitive identity, behavioral skills and emotional intelligence, that if you emphasize those areas, a better leader comes out in the end. Could you talk about that just a little?

Tom Kolditz: Well, sure. You know, I founded the Doerr Institute in 2015 and I'm a social psychologist. That's where my PhD is. And when you get serious about a problem, you bring your education to bear on it. And so, you know, there are a lot of ways that political scientists can define leadership or sociologists or others.

But as a psychologist, there were really three things that dimensionalize leadership. There's a behavioral dimension, which is skill-based. Which is great because you can see it and measure it easily. And then there's an emotional dimension to it. That's really important because most people who study emotional intelligence or emotions agree that they are changeable. That you can change a person rapidly in this emotional dimension. Whereas a personality trait, by definition, is enduring.

To me, it made no sense to focus on personality 'cause you can't much change it. And people with all kinds of personality characteristics were successful leaders.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: True. Right.

Tom Kolditz: And then this notion of leader identity or a cognitive dimension.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yeah. That's fascinating.

Tom Kolditz: Yeah. So if you study people who were successful at leading, there are certain beliefs that they have, cognitive beliefs around their identity. They think they are a leader, that it's who they are. It's part of their identity. It causes them to do things like seek out leader roles. And we've been able to validate that in our students. That when we increase their leader identity, years later, they're still seeking out leader roles to a greater degree than their peers, who didn't have that shift.

And so if you can get people cognitively aligned with the notion that they are leaders, they begin to onboard all the right skills and change their own emotions and change everything.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: You can make them aware that you can teach it?

Tom Kolditz: Unquestionably. We measure it in every coaching session.

What we have found is that students come to the table and they really don't know what leadership is. But when they start working with a coach, the coach kind of reforms their attitudes about that, and shows them that you can lead today. It's not something you were born with. It's not something that is exclusive to people in a role. You can lead in the context of your interpersonal interactions today. And let's establish some goals, let's make you better at it.

And then as they achieve those goals in the course of a semester with a professional coach, their whole worldview of being a leader changes. Now, they see it as something that they are. Not just skills that they apply, something they do. We see it something that lasts.

I mean, every measure we've taken, whether it was two weeks after, nine months after, two years after, these people are changed. To deliver professional coaching on a student by student basis costs half of what classroom instruction costs.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yeah.

Tom Kolditz: It's an enormously effective and efficient way to create a better graduate.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: We got to put it everywhere. Right?

Tom Kolditz: Oh yeah-

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: I know you're working on that.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Tom. This has been incredible. Thank you so much. I'm going to have every student that goes through my program are gonna to have to listen to this. Mitch, any final thoughts?

Mitch Simon: Well, I know I've been kind of quiet. I've just been listening and listening. I was like, I just want to listen to Tom talk. 'Cause I mean, I really do love, you know, both Ginny and I, are leadership devotees. And I read about Rice University, I think when you started. Oh, my gosh, you actually can go to college and have a coach. And it's sensational. So I do urge everyone to go find out more about the Doerr Institute for new leaders, which is D-O-E-R-R at Rice University. I'm just thinking gosh, my son is applying to college. I'm thinking, darn I should've done Rice. So I am really excited. And we didn't even have time to talk to your most recent book.

But I do want to give you just a few moments, Tom. How can people get ahold of you? Tell us just a little bit more about your second book before we close this, 'cause I'm sure a lot of listeners are gonna want to know more.

Tom Kolditz: Well, sure. So the book is called "Leadership Reckoning: Can Higher Education Create the Leaders We Need?" Or develop the leaders we need. The first chapter is edgy and points out how badly higher education performs this task. Remarkably bad compared to all the other things they do that shine with excellence.

And then it kind of talks through what we did at Rice, not as a prescriptive way, but just as an example, of how they might do that. And then the last appendix, appendix four, is where we share the application for the upcoming Carnegie classification in leadership, education and development titled "Leadership for Public Purpose."

And so in March, we will deploy this application on behalf of Carnegie and the American Council on Education. And It will be available to every school in the country. It's a self-examination so you fill it out yourself. Probably will take a committee because it spans the university. It's not a program evaluation or an evaluation of courses. It's the university itself.

But by doing that, you know, we're going to change the way universities develop students as leaders. And we now have a consortium of 152 schools representing 2.8 million students that are basically committed to this kind of improvement. And we think once the Carnegie classification launches, that number will at least triple. So we're looking at impacting 15 million students through their universities, improving what they do, and we are committed to helping them.

I mean, we will give away everything we have at the Doerr Institute. We give away instruments that we've developed. We give away our business models, our business practices, how to get this done affordably. Every quarter we have a virtual visit. We have one this week where schools are going to connect with us. And each of my staff members is going to give a little briefing about how they do their job and how the Institute delivers on its promise to Rice and to the country. So-

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Exciting.

Tom Kolditz: Yeah it really is, you know, I mean, it's been just fundamentally satisfying to be able to help people and inject some quality in the leader development in higher education. That's all we're looking for in the Doerr Institute. We don't sell things to people. You know, we are wanting to improve everyone's position. Especially for people who do leader development in some way in universities, that may be underfunded or under appreciated, this classification is going to make them the most important person on that campus for awhile. And that's what we're hoping for is to kinda increase people's stock a little bit and make the system work.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: So I know for a fact getting a hold of you is not that easy, but there is the Institute. There's your website.

Tom Kolditz: Yeah. Rice.edu always gets to me, or Thomas.kolditz@rice.edu. It's easy to find the Institute. We're everywhere now on social media, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn. And we want to be helpful when I invite people to connect with us.

Mitch Simon: Tom, thank you so much. Thank you, Ginny. And thank you to our wonderful audience of listeners. We look forward to seeing you next time. For those of you who've just loved this episode, definitely share this with your friends and colleagues. And we'll see you next time on our next episode of Team Anywhere.