

Ep. 32: Unit Cohesion and Trust

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Welcome to another episode of the Sword and Shield. This is chief Master Sergeant Chris Howard. And today with me... - Colonel Rick Erredge 960th Cyberspace Wing Commander. - Awesome. Hey sir I appreciate you spending some time with me today. A lot of things are coming up, right, we're in a new year, but we also have a lot of open positions that we're about to hire for. And I just wanted to pick your brain on some of those processes and what are we thinking about when we're doing the interviews and as far as the team goes, right? So what kind of skill sets we're looking for and what things do we take into consideration? - That's a great question, Chief and it's great to be back, having another episode here so this is a lot of fun. I think it seems to me like we hire in waves. I don't know if it's because we just put more energy at certain times to put everything together but it seems like we hire in chunks of waves and then we get some stability and then people move on for development purposes and it's time for us to fill stuff again. So it kind of feel like, yeah we're another one of those wave times. - Yeah. - And in the reserve and I talk a lot about this it's a coalition of willing to move one, right? - Yes. - So we don't require people to move, we're not like AFPC, I think that's one of the flexibilities and the beauties of being a reservist is having some more control over your life and career, and certainly that's one of the reasons why I got off regular force tours so that I have some control and start my young family. And so when I think about first and foremost is team fit, person's attitude, their character do they fit in, that's really important to me. And I think that goes back to my experience as an athlete and growing up in high school and I look back now at all the successful sports teams I was on and I don't remember wins and losses, I remember what was that team like from a locker room perspective so to speak of chemistry and did we get along? Did we have good bonds? And the teams that were successful were teams that, I've got great memories from-- - Right, no I think that, looking back myself, the teams that were the most successful didn't always have the most successful individuals, right? You had a lot of talent, we had a lot of experience at times, we had a lot of different backgrounds that all came together to make that happen. It's not that we had a room full of superstars, right? It's not like, I guess I think back to 90s Olympics where the dream team was built to play basketball where you had all these great individuals that came together we just had a group of individuals that were able to find their niche within the team and then provide that experience and provide that knowledge, and then kept everybody on their toes, right? We always held each other accountable for our piece and helped each other out. I can speak of different missions where that was very successful. I know that when I'm looking at it from an

interview perspective, I'm looking at what does this team need? So what kind of characteristics they're looking for, and then how is that going to mesh well, as well as making sure that they have the right experience and they qualify for the position, right. - And I think what I look to for people and not only you look at, sometimes you have a tendency to focus on somebody's weaknesses and why somebody should be part of the team. - Right. - But sometimes maybe you need just to flip that and look at what are somebody's strengths and maybe your team doesn't have that particular skill set or strength that that person would fit really neatly into and just maybe fill that gap for the team and then build out and make that team well rounded. And so the, my experiences as an athlete has translated I think into my military career as well and when I look back at the teams that I enjoyed working with, and we were successful and specifically deployment teams I think that bond you get with people after you embrace the suck and for a long time, I think really strong relationships there. I'm still really good friends with, my two commanders during one deployment that I spent a lot a lot of time with, I was deputy for both of them the were Reg AF guys that had been there for a year that were on a year tour each, so I got half of each of their tour as a deputy. And then we didn't really have much in common, they were pilots before but after the deployment, we're still good friends and contacted each other regularly now. We text and talk more than most people know, so. - Right and just kind of going back to deployment experiences, right. It was always seems like it was key that we all found a way to kind of work together. What's your perspective on the importance of a team when it comes to a mission? - I think I'm drawn to the military because of the team aspect. I really enjoy being part of the team, I enjoy what I bring to that part of the team. And so I think it's really important, when we look to hire people and create a team atmosphere. We talk a lot, we use the term airmen a lot and I think in the broader sense that can mean a team as well, a group of airmen. And so we don't talk about, we try not talk about individuals and it's important building that team to meet that particular mission and then a squadron as a team of teams and then squadrons are teams of group and then groups equal, I mean, there's a reason why we build this construct from a war fighting machine because it works. And even when you look at the fliers and let's take the fighter pilots, right, they fly in teams, right, we don't send people out individually to do things. We send them out as a group for more sensors and eyes and ears and helps the team be more successful. - Oh, I agree and I think that's one of the great things about wearing the uniform, right? We can look at the greater scope of all the different uniforms when we talk about our sister services. But specifically as an airman, I always get drawn back to a speech that Simon Sinek brings up. He tells the story, I think we've heard it in Ted Talks from the individual themselves about some of the comradery. And it always comes down to because they would do it for me. Right. And I think that that's always one of the great parts about wearing the uniform is that, using the terminology that you said, embracing the suck, right? The fact that we have all had to embrace the suck or in those moments where we're embracing the same suck or spilling blood in the same type of stuff, tends to definitely draw you closer and know that that individual has your back and I think that that's what leads us to having some of the strongest teams. Especially when we talk about the small tactical teams and then we're kind of way

up to the unit, and that makes me start to think about unit cohesion. What are your thoughts about the importance of unit cohesion? - Yeah so I think when you think about it from the big perspective of experiencing common things, build stronger bonds between individual people and then into a team, and it's really about trust, right? And so I think when you spend time embracing the suck with somebody, you're getting to know them and trust them and understand them and building that into a bigger trust factor to a unit level is extremely important because we're asking people to do things that the rest of the population doesn't get asked to do. And so you have to have trust that not only to take care of me and my family, but I have to trust you that you got my back, that if things get bad and suck, that you're gonna pick me up and carry me somewhere or that you're always looking out for me or you're gonna push me when I need to be pushed or knowing something's not quite right and you're there for me and so it's really all about trust and we talk a lot about a lot of buzzwords and stuff but in the end it comes down that that unit that are the most cohesive really just have a foundation of trust. - Right I think the trust is the cornerstone or the key to all of these pieces, right? So if you don't trust an individual, then you're not going to be able to work with them necessarily. Right, you find ways around it but with the lack of trust that just erodes the team as a whole, then it starts to break down unit cohesion. If you don't trust in your leadership, are you willing to fail forward as we've been challenged in the past? Are we willing to accelerate that change? Are we just accepting those losses, without that cornerstone of trust? - Yeah so in order to accelerate, right, you said, we have to trust that we're going to give you the space to make mistakes. - Right. - And that's, at least in my career, I've seen a massive shift like when I first came into Lieutenant, it was like we were not aggressive, we were not assertive, it was about safety, safety, safety. - Right. - And now we've moved to this point where there's some things that we're gonna do that are gonna maybe break some things, we don't wanna break people, but we do want to break class and processes and the way people think, and give space to do that. There's plenty of science out there that proves that, giving people space to use their ideas and to fail fast, really gets us to the end much faster. - Right. No, I do look back, I remember being in an environment where, early years, right, so more of my staff tech sergeant timeframe of my career was risk adverse, very risk adverse, zero defect. I was in a mission set where I had leadership that came down and said, you're not allowed to make a mistake, we don't have the space for you to make a mistake and that includes in training. So even in the training environment, you could not fail. I cannot fail forward, you cannot fail at all, failure means mission overdone. Now there was some things there that held us there, right? Implications of what we were doing at the time and the mission said that we were in that was a highly sensitive. So you could understand where they're coming from. But looking at it from an individual in that team, the team at that point became very stressed. The team started to really pull on each other. Now we embraced the suck and some of us were able to work together and have smaller teams that were very successful. But as a unit you could start to really see the cracks in the foundation when we realized that they didn't trust us. - Yeah and so those fractures really cause problem for unit cohesion, and then it can lead to many other factors that kind of cramp up and then you can get distracted and chase a rabbit down when really the

problem was maybe just the basic trust of giving you space to make mistakes and I've seen a shift in my career that we're more willing to do that and frankly because I think we forced ourselves to it. We put ourselves in a position structure-wise, that we don't have the force structure in order to rely on other organizations to do a lot of, maybe a lot of testing and development and of course, American people and the time and our adversaries get a vote to. So-- - Whether we like it or not. - Right. We need to iterate as fast as we can in order to keep up with them. And we've lost our technology advantage with our adversaries. And so this is the approach that we're going to do, we're going to try to accelerate, and then with that our leaders have to be comfortable in pushing that trust forward. And you need to talk about it, right? You just can't say, I trust you and then your behavior does something else, it proves that I don't trust you. You have to trust and I think we gotta be deliberate about it, we have to talk about it and say, when we say I trust you, that's a lot like telling somebody you love them, like you know what that means, right. You kind of everybody there's a common understanding there. But if I say I trust you to go do it and then you go do it and I say, why'd you do that? Or that was dumb. Like it defeats all purpose and it's way harder to build the trust than it is to lose it. - Oh yeah. It's just a one misstep and trust can be eroded, broken or lost. And I think that a really good point there, sir with what do our actions say? It's easy to throw words at people, right? I trust you, I like you, I believe in you. But then if I'm constantly in your business, right, or if comes to find out that I'm not showing you that kind of trust, whether it's following up. Doesn't mean that you don't trust them, right, you have to have that conversation, you got to build it to that, here's the trust, here's the lanes, and then go forth and conquer and then show them as much, right? - Yeah I think my approach over the years has been not talk about it, I'm not super comfortable with being really eloquent and communicating, but I've used behaviors to build trust. And I think, and I've learned that throughout the years it's not been necessarily something I thought about I'm just going to do. I think I learned that by watching people especially as Lieutenant, I was in a very small detachment. I was the one support officer, I worked for a bunch of A-10 pilots that were flying 75% of the time and by default I was the guy that had to do a lot of the work, a lot of the technical work. They would be the SMEs and provide input and then I had to do a lot of documentation. So they trusted me, and I learned quickly, who was more interested in what I was doing and who had gave me more trust than others, right? - Right. - And I think it helped me learn where to take risk, because they each looked at me and provided me input a little differently. And it came down to one major I worked for and he would do a trust me and say, he would he would spend his time wisely with me and focus on the things that were really important to life and safety. And then the other things were like he gave me more trust and that I could learn with other people and kind of build that capability and really helped me understand to think about where I need to go ask for help, when I need to ask for help, and where to empower people and where to let people take more risk and by taking risks you're building trust through that kind of, through that model. - Right and just kind of pulling that thread a little bit, sir it's again, it comes back to the relationship piece, right? So the fact that that leader, that mentor, that peer sat down with you and you were able to understand where their focus was, to get to know them.

Understand where their boundaries were for that trust, right, helped you trust them as well 'cause now you showed some vulnerability, they're showing some vulnerability, here's my lane, here's your lane and this is how we're merging together to make this happen. And it really has to do with that communication and that conversation and building that relationship between both a peer or a leader in any level, right. - Yeah and as I reflect upon it now it was out of necessity, right. I don't think he deliberately made that a mentoring moment for me. It was like, it was just the reduced time we had together forced him to focus on the things that were really important, and that for the other things, he gave me space to build on that and like most things in my career when I think about how it happened, it kind of feels like it's been by chance, but it's been through osmosis, watching, learning, and just building. And then you talk about I trust you, you can say I trust you a thousand times, but like you said, you show me one time you don't trust me-- - That's in question. - Yeah and so I think it's important for our leaders to have those discussions when it appears or it always got me when somebody tells me you don't trust me. Like made me sit back, reflect and think like, okay, is it a trust issue? Is it something else? - Right. - And then I think it's important for us to sit down and talk to those folks about, I trust you, but here's why I have a concern. And get it out of the realm of the trust or not trust and use it as a moment to build them and help them make the decision better, different next time. - Right, none of those conversations are easy, right. Even in the beginning, just the first conversation, walking in, sir, ma'am, I'm new here, what do you need from me? And then how do we communicate? That's the hard break or start, right. And then as things are progressing, as we hit those lanes in the road, as we hit the bumpers having the conversation of like, okay, again I still trust you. Here's an uncomfortable piece for me or here's something I see as a potential wreck coming down the road and then getting people back into the spot and then building that communication between the two individuals. - And throughout my career I've heard people say trust by verification. So what does that mean? Like everybody does that differently, does that mean I'm gonna double-check on, hey Chief I need you to, I trust you to do this, and then every five minutes I'm like, get done yet? Get done yet. Can I see it? Can I see it? I need to see it. Like that's not trust by verification. Certainly I think when you pair that with a risk factor, then you can talk about, and talk about why you wanna verify that before it goes. - Right. - And then I think the other thing I heard a lot growing up in this Air Force too is, I'm gonna trust you until you give me a reason not to trust you. Like that's not building trust, is it? - That's already a failure statement, right? I already know you're going to fail so I'm just going to give you a leeway until you get it there. It's kind of like that trust but verified. It can be a very tricky, buzz statement, right. I'm guilty of saying it before, it's almost kind of a trust but not, right? I think that you still need some verification but it goes back to how do you really use it and how do you really mean it. Trust but verify can mask micromanagement versus hey I'm here to, I trust you, understand we're just going to have to, as a part of the team and part of the process have to go over these things. So that's the very key verification process. But then again, it's not about verifying that that trust is still there it's just as a project, as the mission moves forward, we still have to have that conversation. It's a staff meeting really, but verification that

that trust and that leadership is doing it, we're just making sure that in that verification process we're learning what barriers and opening the communication so that they can ask you for additional support. - Yeah right. So that's a good kind of flip on that, right? So I'm here to talk about what barriers you have, how I can help you get past those barriers, and through that process of discovery you find out what's been done, what's not done, what's worked, what's not worked so we're able to do that without saying trust but verify- I mean, I trust by verifying, I trust my kids to do their homework in the order and the timing that they need to, but when I get an alert from the school that says the homework's not done. - Right. - Now I go into verification phase. And sometimes they're validated 'cause the teacher didn't have time to update it or it was wrong or they missed it or whatever, and so I use that term with my kids a lot. I've tried to avoid using those terminology, as I've gotten older, because I think it sends wrong message. - Agreed. - I definitely, kind of going back some of the things that you were saying earlier, sir, like earlier in my career, right, it was always about, I didn't know these things right, and a new supervisor, and then a new NCOC and a new flight chief. Many moments where I had to learn where some of those negativities and trust eroding behaviors caused me more problems, and I had to learn how to get around those things, right? My way wasn't always the right way. As a staff sergeant, as the tech sergeant, I'm a SME, I know I'm knowledgeable, I'm one of the best, everybody tells me I'm great so how could it be wrong? And then when it comes to a leadership piece of, well I'm right, why are you questioning me? Versus it being an honest conversation of, hey have you thought about it this way? Or this is not what this individual needs, right. So even recent, when it came to feedback, there was an individual that came up to me and said, "Chief this is my language that I'm trying to speak and I'm not getting that from you." So I had to take a step back and think about what does that mean and how do I adjust to make sure that that member is still going to be viable and I can rebuild the trust in our relationship so they can be successful. - Yeah I think you've got to build the trust individually, and then you build the trust greater into a bigger team, broader team, to get to that unit cohesion and overall, team's important and then, so I tell a great story. So I spent a lot of time coaching kids playing hockey and we're trying to, at 10, 11, 12 kids are finding the individuality, there's wide gaps of performance and abilities at that age and so I was telling this one kid who would just wouldn't pass a puck, wouldn't pass a puck and I said, I use the old adage, there's no I in team. And he turns around and looks at me and goes "But there's an M and E." And I was like, I was flabbergasted, I'm like, "Okay, keep moving." Like I had to process that like, there is an M and E in team and there has to be because we're gonna build individuals, we've got to build individual people up to have them trust each other which leads to unit cohesion and ultimately, when we talk about building culture, it's really about chemistry and cohesion. - Right, and then having the right climate, on top of that to keep fostering that culture, so that it's positive. - Yeah when we here, I don't like the word toxicity and toxic unit and that person's toxic, I think it comes down to most of the time it's trust. They don't feel the unit's cohesive, they're not inclusive, and all those things we talked about really lead down to trust, in order to build your unit you need to build trust and that's what we're trying to do here, we're trying to build this 960th Cyberspace Wing into a cohesive, war fighting,

trustful team. - Right and without the trust, when we talk about accelerate change or lose in the great power competition and all of the outside pressures upon our success, if we don't have that trust, we're not gonna be successful. And most people thrive in a team environment. Now, maybe some are better in smaller teams, some in bigger teams. - Right. - But I think we need to find that good fit. We started out the conversation talking about individual skills and abilities, and I think that's the foundation to build trust is in build that individual personnel, put them in the right opportunity to be successful, and then a by-product of having the right people, the right skills and right attitudes, I think trust just kind of comes out of that process as a natural byproduct. - Yes, sir. And then also going back to the individual there is finding the right fit for them too, right? So sometimes individuals just fit better in other teams and providing that feedback, explaining it to them and then providing them that opportunity to find the team that fits for them. - Yeah and don't quit on somebody, right? - Right. - And because there's a fit for everybody, and so I'll leave us with this story that I find really, that I lean on all the time. And so the 1980 Olympic hockey team, take it back to hockey, right. - There you go, yeah. - The ultimate team game, in my mind, the ultimate team, and so they were a bunch of college kids, 18, 19, 20-year-old kids. And when you look, they're in their 50s and 60s now but when you look at where they're ended up in their professional hockey career, there was really only one guy in that team that ended up having a really kind of super, super successful hockey career. Most of them spent a couple of years and then found other things. So they had to lean on each other individually to be a extremely, every team was more talented, them, they're faster, bigger, stronger but they found a way to succeed as a group of people and I think the leader of the team, Herbie Brooks, was the last guy cut from the 1960 Olympic team that won gold medal at Squaw Valley. So he took that personally, and built that 1980 team to be the team that he wanted to be on. So-- - Got yah. Now that's a great story. I've seen the movie, I've read some books, I've seen some of the documentaries and you're right, that does solidify that, that talent was only capable because of that teamwork, right? That level of talent came together because of the individual pieces that were there. The individual sacrifice of each one of those players and the ability to trust in their teammates, set their teammates up for success, there was no one trying to be a superstar amongst them. It was strictly all of us together, if we're not together then we're going to fail. - Yeah the big jigsaw puzzle to put together and get the right pieces in place and that comes from, when we're selecting, hiring people, we're looking for not only technical skills and abilities but we're looking for the right fit and the right attitude and somebody that's willing to learn, change and continue to build this culture that we're trying to do here at the wing. - Agreed sir, awesome, I appreciate it. - It's always fun. Appreciate it. And I look forward to the next time we speak. - Yes, sir. I think that probably puts us at a good stopping point for our next podcast. So with that I'd like to tell everybody, thank you. - How about you, sir? - Yeah thanks everybody again. We can't say thank you enough for what you do and this is, certainly we're all volunteers here and so we appreciate everybody being part of the team, you're all important, and to build this bigger thing, and we know we've got a lot of things to work on, we'll continue to work on them, we'll try to share, share what we share what we're doing and what we've learned through a

number of different methods and this is just one of those. So very soon we're gonna be very excited to talk about, we have a couple special, really special guests lined up, coming up here in the near future so more to follow on that. Thanks everybody.
(Upbeat music)