

Ep. 34: Innovation Culture and Leadership

Welcome to Sword and Shield, the official podcast of the 960th Cyberspace Wing. Join us for insight, knowledge, mentorship and some fun, as we discuss relevant topics in and around our wing. Please understand that the views expressed in this podcast are not necessarily the views of the U. S. Air Force, nor the Air Force Reserve, and no endorsement of any particular person or business is ever intended. (Light music)

Welcome back to the "Sword and Shield Podcast." I'm Colonel Rick Erredge, 960th Cyberspace Wing Commander. And today I'm joined by... - Brigadier General Bradley Pyburn. - Hey sir thanks for joining us today. - I'm glad I could be here, man. This is awesome. - This is a great opportunity for us and especially in COVID, right? It's kinda hard to get together and keep everybody safe, but I really appreciate you cutting some time off and especially your busy schedule and for a chance to talk to our reservists. - No, I'm glad to be here. I look forward to the conversation. And there's nothing like sitting in a room 20 feet apart, wearing a masks, trying to get a microphone to pick up our voice, so this is gonna be a blast. (Laughs) - Yes, sir. And so I guess, I think a lot about leading in crisis, and like a year ago this week, I was at the wing commander course. And right before kind of everything happened with COVID for the U.S., there was kinda some rumblings in the course about, what are we gonna do? And everybody's kind of... But really weren't talking deep about it. And I remember the course mentor said, he looked around and pointed at all of us and said, "You're all gonna get a chance to lead in crisis. Now what that crisis is may be different for you all, but you're all going to get a chance to lead during that time when it's really difficult. And maybe you lose an Airman, and maybe you have a massive, kind of (indistinct) situation with a flood, but we didn't really talk about a pandemic. And you've been a squadron, and commander, and a DOC, and the wing commander. Have you had a chance to lead during crisis or is this kind of blowing your mind for what you had to deal with in the past? - Well, first, I think you're right. I think this is, I hate to use the word unprecedented. It's been used a lot lately, but clearly this is unprecedented, at least in our recent history. And I agree, every leader, commander, First Sergeant, it doesn't matter what level, everybody is going to get a chance to lead through some kind of crisis. And it's just something you don't expect. It's nothing you plan for. And that's why I'll use an example. I was a little league baseball coach with my son, and we used to take 'em and put 'em out into the field and we would give them scenarios. And I thought, "I really gotta get these kids to think about, 'Hey, what if the ball comes to me in a certain situation? What do I do?'" And it became the funnest part of practice. They would raise their hand. "Coach, hit it to me. Let me tell you what I'm gonna do with a runner on second and two outs." And what it really taught me was, it's that, if you don't practice, you don't think about, "How I'm gonna handle tough situations? What's my North Star? What are the leadership principles that I really focus on? And how am I gonna walk through tough situations?" Because if the first time you start thinking about that is when you're in the middle of a global pandemic, it's gonna be really tough. And I'll

be honest. I was blessed in last year, I got to work with the Vice Chief and the Under Secretary on the COVID task force at headquarters, Air Force, and trying to make decisions, help them think through decisions across the entire Air Force, that affect guard, reserve, everyone, from a COVID perspective. And I will tell you, leadership doesn't change, right? Just simple principles. Trust your people, listen to input, common sense, make good decisions. And I really appreciated what our SecDef at the time said, which was, "Hey, we gotta preserve our force so that we can execute the mission and support our government partners, not just DOD, but the broader government. And then we gotta make sure we take care of our families." And I thought that was a great framework to apply. So how do you take that and apply it like at a squadron level, right? It's the same kind of philosophy, but every mission is different. What does it mean? It's kinda hard to launch jets teleworking, right? So you've gotta think through that and protect your force and just be smart. And I got a chance to listen to Dr. Fauci talk about some of this. And what he said then, really is what we're doing now, which is wear a mask, social distance, be smart, don't take unnecessary risk and then trust your leaders at ECHELON to do the right thing. - Yeah, I found it really supportive coming into this job that we had leadership kind of felt like all the way up the chain that said, "We're not gonna tell you how to do it. We're gonna tell you the things you need to do individually, but you gotta figure out for your local conditions what's the best way for you to take care of the mission, and make sure you're taking care of your people and your families." And for us, it's really kind of difficult. Thank complexity, not everybody lives around their unit and they may not live near base at all. So they've got a completely different scenario going on where they live, that they're having a hard time understanding maybe why we're in more of a lockdown medical issue than maybe where they are. And so, we really try to do that and push the decision down squadron commander level about when to bring people in, how many people to bring in, and working with their mission partners about, "Hey, what do you need right now to get the mission done? And if you don't need to be here, then let's figure out another way for you to participate." I know 16th Air Force did a really good job outlining kind of what you guys wanted to do and prioritize who needs to be in and who doesn't. - Yeah, that was really the first thing I got to take a look at when I got here this past summer was, I think the day before I arrived on base, we'd gone to HPCON Charlie. And I'm worried about being able to get a washer and dryer ordered, some very, very simple things in life, but we're able to work through that. But really, from a 16th Air Force perspective, what's the priority, like you said? What are the essential no-fail missions? And then how do we come up with creative ways to structure the workforce so that we can still conduct mission, but we can protect people and keep them safe. And as we've learned more and more about the virus and what we're learning again, the social distance and the mask really are protecting people for the most part as long as you're disciplined in using those. And so we've been able to be really smart about how we conduct business. But it's exactly what you said. You have to trust leaders at ECHELON to do the right thing and to take care of their people, and then trust them to make decisions. If they see something that they're not sure of, that they think is unsafe, trust them to make that call and to call them, knock it off, and back them up when they make that call. And to your point, I think about from a reserve

perspective, having members in a lot of different places with different circumstances, how important communication is and making sure they understand, "Hey, this is how we're conducting the mission. Hey, from a safe perspective in your area it may look a little bit different here." And then again, trusting leaders to take care of their people. To me, that's what it's all about. I really don't believe people get up in the morning and say, "Hey, I'm gonna figure out a way to mess this up today. I really believe we have amazing people in our Air Force. And so, I really wanna make sure they're empowered, make sure you're giving them the right information so they can make a good decision, and then trust them to make the decision and back 'em up. And then you know what? If they make a mistake, pick 'em up, dust 'em off, and help them learn from it so they can grow as leader. - Yes, sir. I think this podcast really was an outgrowth of one of those thoughts of reflection that Sam and I had about. We've gotta find better ways to get information out to everybody and we want them. And so we kind of took this approach of, I want you to consume the information in a way that you want to, on your schedule as a reservist, that makes sense for you and your family. And it's been hard to try to reach all those channels. We even did a little survey, like what kind of social media and we got Reddit back, we kind of were all over the map. We focused on a number of these things in a podcast and angle that, and it's been really helpful for me to do this and even just think about what we're gonna force you to think about what we're gonna communicate, how we do that, and make sure that we're getting them the information they need to make their own personal decision right now, but what they need to do to protect their family. And I keep hearing from Joe Scobey on down on the reserve side, that we're not going to go back to doing the business the way we used to do everything. And for us reservists, it's really like, that's awesome because we're stuck in this grind of, you gotta show up the physical, be present for every single UTA or you can't do your job, but 16th Air Force really did a wonderful job. And one of our reservists, actually working with 26 NOS was the one that really helped with all the VPN issues and cleared up some issues and really made light years of change in our mind that we've been kind of fighting against that capacity issue. And all of a sudden, it's opened up the floodgates and the world changed immediately. - I think we've learned a lot, to your point, that it used to be the case that right, physical, virtual presence equals physical absence. I don't think that's the case. I think what we've learned is with technology now, there's a lot of things you can do. I can give you an example. Maybe a couple of years ago, somebody would have asked me to do a promotion or retirement and based on travel and in operational tempo, I may not have been able to commit to doing that particular endeavor, but now we don't even think about it, right? In fact, I'm doing a promotion ceremony for somebody that I've known since they were a Lieutenant on Friday, and we're going to do a resume, right? That's just standard business now. We have figured out a way to fight through COVID. I've been to retirements, promotion ceremonies, we're conducting business. Again, I'll go back to my air staff time back over this last year. And when COVID first hit, and we kinda basically, send everybody to telework status for the most part. We were conducting a lot of staff meetings and engagements that we could over things like CVR teams. And we have figured out a way to make it work. There is a flip side to it. And as leaders, it's

something we've got to be cognizant of, which is, I do believe we are, as human beings, we crave for human contact. I was joking about it when I came in with you guys today. I'm stuck in my office on VTCs all day long and I miss human contact. I think we miss that. And something as leaders, we've gotta be very cognizant of. So I think you're right. We're not going to do things the same way we've done before this. We're gonna do things a little bit differently, but I still think we've got to find a balance between leveraging technology, being virtual, but also finding ways to make that human contact an important part of how we conduct business. - Yeah, I agree. You got kids and I got kids, and I looked through their eyes. And one's at school and one's at home right now. One's at college. Three vastly different experiences. For two of them, it's working, for one, it's not. And it's kinda hard, and I think about that for a reservist. It's probably similar. This probably works really well for some folks. Some folks aren't, and I know I've been deliberate about when I hear the dog bark in the background or a baby point at somebody or crying, or they gotta go. We had a major, he had to go change a diaper 'cause the wife just ran for five minutes, of course. And during the meeting and we're like, "Dude, just go take care of it. It's okay." Things happen, we realize that. And it's helped us understand. I've got a little bit more of a peak in some people's lives. And I understand maybe them better. And some of the challenges that they're going through. - I've seen the same thing. I've had a couple of folks both here and in my previous job at the Pentagon, that you can see when schools shut down and education was really being conducted by parents and they were trying to manage maybe between spouse's, day shift, night shift who's gonna work when and how they're gonna take your kids. Really, how much of a struggle that was for some folks. I mean, it's really hard. I mean, how important teachers are in our society and having the ability to trust in them for education, but then to see folks that are so committed to excellence, don't want to fail. And they have so much stress and pressure on them because of exactly what you described and letting them know, "Hey, it's okay. It's okay. If you're on a VTC and your kids are making noise in the background." And actually, personally, I think that's pretty cool, right? Because it reminds us why we do what we do. We have an oath to the constitution, but we also do it for our families. We want to make sure they're safe and they can have a great life, and it's not bad to have those reminders. But it also allows us to do things like, I had a particular person that I worked with that needed a break. And we decided, "Hey, why don't you go to the cabin in the woods? You have Internet, you have connectivity, and you can continue to do mission, but you can get your family out of the city and you can get 'em out there, and they can get outside in the outdoors. Because there's no people around." Just things like that because we can conduct business virtually now. So absolutely. But I have really seen a different side of folks and I've appreciated it. But I'll go back to that concern as leaders, we've gotta make sure, I'll use one of General Hawk's comments, which is intrusive leadership. Making sure we understand what those challenges are for our folks, what help they may need, and to be there in their time of need to make sure that they're okay, because if we invest in them they're always gonna be there when we need to call on them to go do our nation's business. - Yes, sir. We've had similar experiences too where folks had to go take care of a family issue, and we've given them some space to do that, and get your business done, stay engaged if you need to,

and if you need to step away, you step away and take care of your business, and then get back after it. So the other side of that, I think I spend time thinking about is, trying to manage their time for them. How much time are people engaged than some folks, and including myself, I have a hard time with the boundaries of time now, because it's so easy to kind of stay connected all the time and people. And I really gotta manage my time and not drive people to eight, nine, o'clock just 'cause I'm working, make sure they're working. And so the biggest discovery for me was the delayed delivery on the email. - Right. - That was a huge monkey off my shoulder. I can still work, and I cannot put that expectation on somebody else. But I did find one group commander one time, he said, he saw all these emails come in Monday morning and he's like, "Man, you were up early." I'm like, "Well, no, really I kinda cheated." And so I was able to pass that onto him. And he learned like, "Hey, this is something that I can do to take care of my people." - I had the same affliction. As a wing commander, I would catch up on Saturday mornings. Pot of coffee, kitchen table, and just really cramped through a bunch of emails. And my vice finally pulled me aside and goes, "Hey, boss, I just want you to know, I don't read my email on Saturday." And I said, "God, I don't want you to." He goes, "But I know you're in there or you're at your house cranking through them." And I've been on the recipient. And it was like you described, the Monday morning deluge of emails coming in. And I think the boundary thing's really important. And that is another concern in the environment we're in. There are some folks that will have trouble establishing those boundaries. It's easy at the Pentagon. I like to use the Pentagon because everybody's got some kind of commute, and there's this natural, hopefully it's a decompression. For some folks, it might be an increase in pressure based on their drive in the traffic. - Sure. - But this idea that I can get into a car or I can put in some music and get onto a bus or a Metro, and just kinda let the day melt away a little bit. And then when I get home, I'm ready to engage my family. My concern is, as more and more folks are doing these activities, those boundaries are blurring. And they're conducting business at night. They're conducting business on the weekends. And it's just really hard. Those norms that we were used to, are kinda going away. And I just think it's another example for leaders, the kinds of things that we have to be sensitive to. And I think sharing the challenges you have. I think there's nothing wrong with sharing with your folks, "Hey, this is something I'm struggling with." I don't really decompress as much as I used to, and acknowledging that you may have to work through things like that. I think folks appreciate when they see that their leaders are humans and they need the same kind of support and help they might. - Yeah, I can relate to that. Once we moved on base, I used that 20 to 25 minute drive every day to kinda shut everything and then be present when I got home. And it's even harder now. On base it's seven minutes from here to there. And what I've noticed too, is that, I mean on the positive side for me is, it's really hard being one guy, full-time, senior leader, all six level here to handle all six wing commander type of engagements with the number of mission partners we have just here locally. But with the virtual, I've been able to stay engaged and go to a lot of these more meetings and open up my relationships have just, I think kind of flourished because of this opportunity, and allows us to stay more engaged as reservists. So I think there's some positive and negatives that are kinda constantly flowing in and out.

And as leaders, I really try to reflect and spend time thinking about, be more deliberate about my decisions, how I use my time. - I think so. And the other thing I would offer, a lot of our young innovative, brilliant, and not even young even our seasoned brilliant, innovative folks. They've got ideas that we need to listen to about how we can better utilize the technology and utilize time to do the same amount of mission even, given the circumstances we're in. And I continue to be amazed. If you just turn your folks loose, what they can do, and what they'll show you, if you don't constrain them unnecessarily. And so I think that's another part of this conversation we've gotta keep having is, we used to do things for a long time, a certain way. We don't ever want to necessarily go back to exactly that way, but how can we move forward and take these lessons learned and even do some new and creative things moving forward? And really, you talk about recruiting talent. Those are the kinds of things. When people talk about the kinds of organizations they want to work with, those are the kinds of organizations they want to work with. I got a chance to meet Elon Musk. This has been a couple of years ago when I was a wing commander. General Raymond, Air Force Space Command at the time, took us for a commander's conference. And it was amazing to me, the culture of his organization. And people, they don't recruit people to work there. People bang down the doors trying to get a job there. And I was talking to, I'm guessing she was in her late twenties, early thirties. And she was a graduate of an Ivy League school. Astrophysicist, and she was working the Starlink Project. So the Internet for the world. And I asked her that question, "How did you get recruited here?" And she said, "Oh no, I didn't get recruited. I came here and sold them on me." And I'm like, "Why, what is it about this organization?" And here's, what's so cool. She said, "Don't you know? We're going to Mars." And I went, "Really?" And my command chief at the time, who's a little bit of a realist says, "Okay, boss, let me check this out." So he goes and talks to some folks on the side, he talks to a security guard. He talks to the person running the little coffee bar, and each of them independently said the same thing. He said, "Hey, is it for real? What's going on with this place? Everybody's so positive and the energy is so good." And they all said, "Don't we're gonna Mars." And I thought about that culture and that innovation, everybody's empowered, they've got this singular vision, everybody's rolling in the same direction. And it was just like a field of positive energy. And so to me as leaders, how do you take an example like that, take a situation that we're in that people look at and it is really tough? How do you flip it to being an opportunity, and leverage the good ideas with your folks? And they just love coming back to it. And the recruiting takes care of itself. - Yeah. - I know it's a great vision. It's Shangri-La, I guess. But I mean, to me, as leaders, that's what we should strive for, creating an environment like that. - Yeah, so I think about creating space for people to make mistakes and just always saying, "You know what? If it doesn't work, we're still gonna learn from it." There's something valuable there and learning. And over the Christmas break, we took a trip down to South Padre, and there's a SpaceX site down there. In mid December, they had a failure. A rocket came back and blew up and made a mess. We're like, "Let's go see it. Failure." And then as we were driving over there and back and then I'm reading through an article about it and leadership said, "It's not a failure. We learned what not to do. That was an extremely valuable lesson for us." And so I think about trying to get the big Air Force

at least my little pond here to think that way and give them space to make those decisions and make mistakes. We talk about failing forward, but that's kinda hard for people to actually see, I think. What does that really mean? How far are you going to let me go? How do you think about that? - So I'll go back to that same conference that we got to meet Elon Musk. We also got to meet Jeff Bezos from Amazon. And I say, we got to meet him. We're in a big conference center and he comes out and talks to us. And one of the things he talked about was, we don't fail doing operations, we fail doing experiments. And we expect to fail because we're going to learn something from the experiment. And I thought that was a really good way to approach. We talk about fail first. You try something new, you make sure the right folks understand the risk, the reward, what you're doing, and why you're doing it, what you expect to learn, whether it works or not, and you conduct experiment. And then you figure out if it worked or if it doesn't work, and then you pick yourself up, you learn from it, and you move forward. I think what we do is we confused failing in operations with failing doing experiments. And I think you and I would probably, well, I don't wanna put words in your mouth, but certainly, I wouldn't wanna fail doing an operation that we've done many, many times, where we understand what the TTPs are. We practice, we train. But if we're going to try something new and different, the fact that we almost expect perfection is unrealistic. I mean, you can look at our space program back in the 50s and 60s. You take a look, like you mentioned SpaceX and the failure, you gotta be careful when there are lives at risk, right? That's different. But when you're trying something new, like letting one of your airmen or NCO's or young officers go out and take a chance on writing a piece of software or trying a new technique with the particular objective they're trying to accomplish. And I go by the way, if they are successful, and really learn something, imagine the power of what that person now believes they're capable of. To me, that's how you have to manage it. It's an experiment. We're trying something new, but in normal operations, right? That we understand we really don't want to fail. - Yeah, I think we as leaders got to figure out ways to reward people for that, until the institution values that as a core competency. I think some people are still going to be kind of afraid. You're gonna have your people that wanna do it, but to get more people to think along those lines, I think is really hard for us in this institution to get people to think that way. - You gotta reward what you value. You really have to. And I think once you do that, the rest will take care of itself. So we say we want people to take chances. We say we want people to experiment. We say we want you to fail first, but you gotta look for the examples of where somebody does that, and they're championed as this great example of exactly what we want. Hey, we learned from this. I can't tell you the specifics, but in our cyber world, I'll just give you some generics. There was a particular thing that we conducted. And at the end of it, we did an operational assessment. And we were going to brief General Nakasone our combatant commander. And the conversation was, "Hey, this thing didn't exactly pan out like we thought it was gonna pan out." But then we looked at him and said, "But look at what we learned from this." And so I actually got excited. I said, "Guys, this is a great news story. Let's present it as what we learned and how we're going to take that moving forward. And the next time we do an operation like this, how we're gonna do a little bit differently." And it was very well received. And so some of

this is, the perspective you take when you look at it, and then you give that, I want to call it psychological safety. I've heard that term. - Sure. - Around experiments, around folks taking chances so they understand, "Hey, I got your back. This is something new and different, and we're gonna learn something from this." And then you champion 'em once that thing is over. I think the more we do that, reward what you value, I think we'll see more and more folks coming around. - And the more iterations you do and the broader you can do, right? Somebody else may pick up on that ED and just have a little bit of a different tweak to it. And all of a sudden, you've got brilliance. Or they fail again, and you learn something else. And so I think sometimes we're afraid to fail because of the stigma around it. And people are like, "Well, I'm gonna try this but don't tell anybody. Kinda keep it inside." Let's share that knowledge. It's knowledge, it's new knowledge. - And the last piece I would add is, you want to be a learning organization. So you try something new, it doesn't work. You can't keep doing that same thing over and over again, expecting different results. You've gotta change the inputs. You've gotta change your TTPs. You've gotta modify the experiment if you will move them forward, and then learn from it. And so, if you put those things all together, I think you can have a really successful organization. - Yes, sir. Hey, so we really appreciate your time, and thanks for coming out. We can talk like this forever and ever. And so we hope to get you involved in the organization at one of our upcoming leadership summits. I know we kind of, your schedule got tied up there but we definitely, I know the reservists would love to hear from you and maybe in a different environment when we kind of talk about what we're doing to help you and get after 16th Air Force problems, and what we can bring to the table for you all. And so I just want to say thanks again. And I know you're a big supporter of reservists. You've told me that a number of times before and how we can contribute. We look to continue with that relationship in the future. And I'll leave you with any last words you have. - Yeah, thanks Rick. I think really, and I've told you this, and every one of my commands, really, squadron commander, operations center commander, wing commander. We couldn't have conducted our mission without the total force, and a reserve guard across the board. In fact, one of my closest friends who was an active duty member that's now in the reserves served with me in Iraq, and he's doing amazing things. And I look at him as an example to me, all righty. He transitioned, he's a dog's teacher, he's a reservist, he's got a family, he's doing all these great things. He's committed to his community. And to me, that's a perfect example of what you guys are. You're plugged into your communities. You're doing great things with industry. Oh, by the way, that you're bringing to us, and we learned from, that would be my plea, is keep bringing those great industry ideas to us, and keep challenging our thinking. And then the amazing leaders and airmen that you are, and you integrate into our daily operations. And we cannot do it without you. And so, I've been proud, like I said, in many cases to serve with members of your wing. And I look forward to that partnership continuing. So thanks for letting me spend some time with you today. - Yes, sir. Appreciate it. Thanks a lot. Until next time. (Rustling) (Slow music)