

Ep. 36: Touch-point 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 to the "Sword and Shield" podcast. I'm Colonel Rick Erredge, Today I'm joined by. - Chief Master Sergeant Chris Howard. - Hey, Chief, how you doing? - I'm not doing too bad, right? It's a pretty good week so far. - Good, yeah, post UTA week for us here. And so there's always a number of things that are rattling around in my head and doing some reflection about what happened and how we can do things better. What's going around in your head these days? - Well, sir with a lot of things, UTA, you get a lot of files that get dropped on your desk. And then also I'm doing some professional development on the side, myself and the thing that's getting stuck in my brain right now is a, really what I call as a touch point leadership, right? Or, and touch point management. I think that some people have heard a version of the list in my head as a management by walking around, but I'm not trying to put a negative context to it, right, so as I'm doing the professional development on team building, one of the things that came up is how do we engage with our team members in a good manner and in the spaces that they feel comfortable. - Yeah, I heard that as a Lieutenant too management by walking around and that usually followed by things of get out to know your people be a leader lead by example do the things that they're doing ask if you being turned a wrench, ask if you can push the broom, whatever they're doing, get out there and kind of break that barrier down and see that job or that task from their perspective. - Not definitely right. So I think that looking back through my career a lot of my positive reflections upon leadership or moments that they were in our work center and engaging, right? So I had one commander a couple assignments ago who had never worked on a forklift and we got this new forklift and it was really touchy. It was touchy as all get up, but we warned him put him in there, but he started rolling around our path where we were putting up pallets on this forklift. And we're like, it was just funny to see how he reacted to it, but the important part was that he came down to where we were at because our facility was detached from the unit. We were miles away. It was really easy for us to be considered out of sight out of mind. We felt that way quite often, right? So the fact that here, the commander came down and spent some time with us and goofed off in a positive way, learned a little bit but also helped us a little bit and build that relationship. And I think that, that also brings them on the fact that when we look at our wing, right, and even each group it doesn't matter what level you're at. There is a certain level of distance between all of us. - Yeah the tyranny of distance we talked about can be really difficult. And I had a similar experience as you when I was a second Lieutenant. I had a boss that, I was doing some writing on some A-10 weapon system and missiles. And at that time, there was no A-10 SAM.

There's really not a part test trainer. And the second Lieutenant as a personality education training specialist, I couldn't grasp it. And he's like, okay, let's go. So we walked out to the flight line, they spun up a jet. He sat in the cockpit, he let me sit in the cockpit. He showed me what the pilot sees through that view. And then I was immediately able to visualize the words I needed to use to get the point across and what training material we're working on. And just that little example was extremely helpful for me to understand. And I think I later moved to my next assignment or a PCA was to that same unit. - Okay - And so I went from off the fly line onto the fly line squadron section commander. And I use that opportunity to wander around and kind of, the squadron commander, I always wants to know, what are the people thinking? What are they feeling? What are they talking about? And as a first Lieutenant at the time now I had that opportunity to get around and meet people. And that environment, it was easier because we had all 550 people, we're all within a couple hundred yards on the flight line we could do that. This wing obviously is much different the way we're distributed across the United States and number of mission sets. And so I find myself challenged often about how we're connecting with our airmen and what's the best way to do that. - Right, now definitely sir right. The gains that we get from that individual conversation are invaluable. I can tell you that there's a lot of things I would just not learn about our airman if it wasn't for those moments that we discuss, right? You'll find out about their families about some of their goals or even some of their hobbies that all lead to bigger things. Right, so like right now, on my board I'm working on some of our strategic factoring for senior NCOs and I'm coming from anywhere and am like, "Okay I know this individual based on this conversation." Now there's still plenty of senior NCOs that I have very little insight on them. That's putting the challenge on me to get out there and find out about them. And then also challenging those superintendents to give me the same feedback so that we can understand that whole airmen concept because that's important, right? Especially as we're detached, when we look at COVID spending that time on the phone video chatting and if at all possible personal is gonna lead to how do we build a good strong culture and climate within the 960th. - Yeah, and I think it's really important to do that. Not necessarily within our wing, but you know every supervisor, every subordinate supervisor, everybody in the chain needs to, we talk about know your people. And so we just say that we don't really tell people what that means, but knowing somebody's birthday is, or knowing and especially now in COVID like understanding who's doing school at home, right? Who's being home teacher and just understanding those points as when you're talking to them? So you understand what stressors going on in their life. If they feel that they understand that their boss understands them and knows what's going on I think it takes that piece of the stress off of them and makes them more productive and efficient members to the unit. - Yes sir, and then also understanding their life what's driving them, right? So why do they put that uniform on? Why are they in this job? What keeps them invigorated to continue to do this job? Because the demand signal keeps on piling up every day, the distance keeps on getting driven between us on a regular basis with everything going on with COVID and society, so it's those conversations and those touch points that I think are very key into developing that relationship and making sure that those bonds don't get broken. 'Cause I feel at

times that those bonds are in jeopardy. - Yeah, it certainly tenuous and stressed it's stretched maybe if you think about in a rubber band. And so we've tried to do that through a number of ways and this podcast is one of those ways, right? So give people a little bit inside the us and what we're thinking about, what our stressors are. And so I've got some good feedback about people just love to hear us talking about normal things day-to-day that we're stressed with and sharing some things. But I think that goes both ways. For me, COVID has given us a unique opportunity into people's lives that we might not have had, right? - Yeah. - And so seeing people on video, hearing things during phone calls about, the dog bark and especially around the holidays I think if we did some metrics around the number of dog barks or people's packages showing up during calls and stuff it would have been off the charts. But I giggle about that and I was on the phone with Ms. Martinez one time and her dog was just going nuts about something and we just giggled about it. Like that doesn't bother me. It just gives me a lens side what's going on. And, I've heard about people, kids having a fight in the background over a toy or something. And a certain member had had to put us on hold they had to change the diaper. Like all that stuff helps us understand what's going on in people's lives, and really helps and now I have that, "Hey, how's this going?" Or, "How's it going now? Or, "I remember this," is that changed and it's really makes that personal connection for people and makes them feel like they're really part of unit. - Right it humanizes us right. It definitely gives us some insight that it's not just this wall or that door or that title now all of a sudden, I'm sure that people have been on calls with me where they've probably heard my daughter singing some kind of random song. I don't know if she knows the chords to any particular song. - I have heard it, its awesome. - I enjoy it personally to a certain degree. It's just like, go ahead those little things that now you get an idea into a person's life and understand that, okay now that person isn't as rough or gruff or as much of a wall as I thought they were. - Yeah, so I'm going to call out, well, I won't do that. I'll tell that story off the air but I'm sure you've been on calls when I'm at home and my wife loves to like turn the dishwasher on during my phone calls. So I gave this look and we have this back and forth about did you really do that like, washer and dryers run in the background. I'm like, what is this all noise? And 'cause I can't get Wi-Fi back in my office. Otherwise it'd be back in this little makeshift office we have. So people have kind of heard that and I've heard giggles and comments about what's going on. And so I enjoy sharing a little insight as well, it's kind of a little bit of stress like, hey this is really hard what we're doing. And so just being able to breathe and giggle about something really helps me. - Right and now also I would put some of the positive spins on some of this distance for me personally and I think that the fact that I've been able to work from home a little bit more let me see my daughter a lot more, right. And I get to hear those songs, right. - Those are the things you're going to cherish forever, right? It's not the work I made you do It's the singing the songs and that relationship with your daughter it's a mix. (Both chuckles) - It's right because break time is hide and seek time, right so, I get a 15-minute break, it's you go hide. Daddy's going to grab his lunch between meetings real quick. And then I'll find you real quick, along the way. So, but it goes back to those touch points, right? So if we are able to engage with our team members and our airmen and find out what parts are working for them in the scenario and finding

out what's working in their lives then that helps us make some good decisions, right? Or present opportunities we might not have necessarily thought they would be interested in. - Yeah, and I think for me too, I've been able to probably meet and work with a broader range of people that I might normally would not have, specifically around the telework and the virtual space. Some folks are able to have opportunities professional development opportunities to dig into a program or do some professional development that I've been able to join and learn about them as they're doing presentations or see some people are presenting topics and issues for decisions and things we want to do. That normally we probably wouldn't have had the chance to do right? Or it would get rolled up to a higher level and then the commander would have done it we're empowering our people to do these things. And we're seeing great strides. And even though I can't get out there and visit every airman person I do feel like I got a connection there. We started meeting with each unit virtually. - Right. - We had really good discussion this past weekend with one of the units we're going to keep doing that. And I think that also helps. It's probably a little bit awkward for some people. I feel more comfortable with it now but it's probably more awkward for those airmen, sometimes it's easier just to walk up and to talk, ask somebody questions. So I'm trying to break that barrier. Certainly doesn't replace the in-person touch point but we're trying to make, do with what we can. And so at some point we'll be able to get back out there and travel. - Right and I think that as we progress, right as vaccines come into play and we see hard immunity and we start to restrict the COVID. We have made a giant paradigm shift, right? Especially from a reserve perspective, we've looked at some of the technology that's now in place that's been proven and we've got good numbers against, it allows us to then re-look at how we do day to day business, even as a traditional reservist, right? How can I get after some of these problem sets so that I can spend more time doing the training or doing the mission during the UTA? How do I offset some of these needs right? Especially for my traveling TRS how do I make that a little bit more a desirable how can I expand my pool of applicants? Right, so pre-COVID, the paradigm was really stuck of, well if you're going to be a TR you're going to have to be here every month and you're gonna have to travel. I think that that requirement is still there but there is some flexibility at the tactical level to make some decisions. Okay, well, we can offset this maybe forego this piece and still get the desired outcome. - Yeah, I agree a 100% and I don't want to go back to that model, right? I wanna do something in between where the squadron commanders, is making good decisions about this is what I need here, this UTA in person for this reason, whatever reasons those are. And then these folks, especially if something's going on in somebody's life or just the commute time, even if it's local, right? Just saving somebody an hour during the day can equal into a more effective and better morale for that person. And so we're going to continue to push for that. And, I've heard all of the John Scobey say "We're not gonna go back to doing business the way we did. Let's reimagine what participation looks like for reservists." To the point of, it doesn't have to be Saturday or Sunday - Right. - Right? If somebody were schedules they have Tuesday Wednesdays off why can't they do their drill Tuesday, Wednesday whether that's in person or virtual. Right, and so I challenge our leaders and supervisors out there, to think differently about it. I know it's going to be hard,

right? 'Cause it's out of the norm - Yes - You got to manage different schedules, but we can find ways to be just as productive or more productive, if we're meeting people where they are best aligned to do the mission. - Right, yeah and then by having those communications, by having those touch points then you can understand what's going on in that individual's life and then match that up to a certain degree. Right, there's some things we're not going to be able to necessarily always adjust against but at least having that conversation so that we can see where we can make this, beneficial for both. Because really when we talked about the reservist it's a symbiotic relationship. And as long as we can keep it beneficial to both sides I think we find a lot of growth and then we get into innovation and then we actually get into mission execution. And then the joy of serving, right? - Yeah, I agree, and I think balance is probably a bad word. I grew up in the reserve like the three-legged stool, right? We need to balance a three legged stool your civilian job, your family, your military job. So I don't necessarily think those stool legs are all the same length. - No, definitely not. - At any one time. And they should be able to move between what's going on in your life. So you might not be able to sit on the stool. It's going to stand - Right? - But the seat is going to be - Tilted - A wonky angles and tilted. And I think looking at it from that perspective understands people coming, going, and on-ramps and off-ramps for their level of participation based on what's going on in the other parts of their life looking at their participation is a little bit easier. Maybe we get closer to that that level seat that we can set on and really call it good. And so for me, at least the way I think about it is, if I can do a different kind of model 'cause how many times on UTAs of chief have you said, "Man it's Sunday afternoon, end of the day, people are signed out." You're like, man I never got a chance to really check on so-and-so. I didn't get a chance to talk to so-and-so because so many things are going on. If we break up the participation in different way like it gives that supervisor more touch time with their individuals, cause it's not everybody at the same, it's not the supervisor meeting one hour with everybody. It's, you're gonna have to have two meetings but gives you an opportunity to engage smaller groups of people, to learn more what's going on give them an opportunity to participate and be more productive in whatever that role is they have. - Right, and I knew that like the fear instantly comes into is that a demand upon more of my time. And I think that that's where as leaders we have to look at it's not so much a more of a demand is an adjustment in how we demand that time. Right, it doesn't mean that you need to work 20 plus hours to get there. It's how do I readjust some of the other things? How do I prioritize this relationship as important, right? Especially in that leadership role whether it is a supervisor as a superintendent, as a commander, which weapon system Pardon me, more worried about is it the biggest weapon system, the personnel, or is it this one little weapon system that executes this partnership. - Yeah, if you think about If you spend your time in ways that makes your people feel more inclusive and part of the mission and productive, there's probably less time you need to spend doing remediation, training, maybe disciplinary stuff. And so that time goes away. So it's not necessarily that we're adding to your time as a supervisor, it's, we're asking you to use your time differently to be more effective. And frankly, maybe there's things we should stop doing. Like I think that's on the table too. So I think if everybody went through an

exercise of what do I need to start doing? What do I need to stop doing? What do I need to keep doing? I would like to see more and more touch point leadership going to start column. And then hopefully some other things can go on the stop column because you don't need to do those anymore. - Yes, sir and I think that we're in a prime environment, right? As we've gone through COVID, now we also have the accelerate change that we use. That's not just the mission. That is how we do business as a whole. It's a philosophy, it's not necessarily a mission statement, right? And then that drives me to think about the counterbalance. You talked about the stool the balance and everything like that. We talked about some of the demands but how do we get away from fatigue? How do we balance from fatigue, especially the fact that normal cycle was, I started my day off. Let's say I got up at 4:35 o'clock in morning prepping in the day or in the morning then I move to work and maybe it takes me a half hour, 45 minutes to drive to work, then doing my coffee, I'm doing my routine. I'm getting myself set, I do my day. Then I go home, I got another 30, 45 minutes drive. So I've got some of that downtime. Right, we do a lot of the partnership where is that down time is built in. What were those rituals that you were doing before? I think we talked about some of the engagement models of, the two, 10, four and seven or five and seven my math is off. - I am sorry (both chuckles) - Yeah, so I think about that in my role, my two started at, used to start at five. - Right. - And then went from there and now my two starting at six. And so like, my world has shifted an hour to the right. So I'm still trying to put enough time in but I find myself spending more time working during more work hours across our different time zones, right? So, we've got a pretty big window from East to West Coast. And so I've tried to kind of look at what's the best fit and so I've seen that model shift and I don't know if it's good or bad, but there's an issue there with self discipline and boundaries when it comes to work for sure. - All right, and that's where I'd like to challenge everybody out there is in that beginning to really build yourself a good solid regime, right? Or what that looks like to get yourself prepared and make sure that you're ready for the day, as well as holding as firm as possible on that five and seven, right? That five being that whatever you're doing for you and your family and that seven for the rest, and just where you need to, if the fatigue's kicking in there and your sleep's getting a damaged because of it our long-term effects are gonna be much more problematic than just taking a deep breath and shifting this or offloading that, right? And finding out what really important. - Absolutely, yeah that shifts throughout your day, two days a week and so I found it helpful that I have this watch that tracks my sleep. And so I do look at it every night kind of see the type of sleep and the like the sleep I got and I'll try to adjust and just try to get more or like yesterday I woke up and it felt great, right? I had the COVID shot Tuesday, Wednesday, I wake up I'm like, wow, I don't have a sore arm really? It's great I went for a four-mile run and then this morning I got up and I was like, holy moly, what happened? I am not into it today. - Yeah true - And I don't know why, right? But tonight I'll take a look at it I am like, I probably need to go to bed, maybe an hour early. And then figure out what that looks like. So if I'm going to cut an hour out of the five for the family, then today, I'm gonna have to cut an hour out of work just to give the hour back to the family. And I think that's where I find getting, again I don't like the word balance, but a better allocation my time is that

sometimes it's going to come with the expense of work. And I know it's the right one day 11 and around here and so if I need to take, I need to work nine hours instead of 10 today, then I'll do that and make sure I'm putting the time where I need to but I also need help. I need people around me, family and work family to say, "Hey remember two hours workout, prep for work, 10 hours of work five hours family and seven hours sleeping." - Again, not firm, but a good guideline, right to start with that point. Now I know that you challenged me on a regular basis sir as a team member to make sure that I'm keeping those allocations in the right zones and making sure that, A, healthy, both physically, I'm mentally prepared for work. And also that the family life has not taken too much of a hit, right? Cause as you said, we've got all these different time zones that we've got to hit the demand signal doesn't change. When we talk about the full-time versus a TR staff the demand signal changes for a TR staff, right? So they have to do their full day of work. Then they get engaged in the evening. They need information from you. So that extends that out and finding the best way to support both. - Yeah, so I've been a TR, I was a TR Squadron Commander I know how hard it is. And so when I talked to them too I try to assess what's going on in their lives and make sure they're thinking about those things. And then I think the load, I mean empowerment is probably an overused term but being able to trust your folks and knowing them good enough because you spent time having touch time with them and understanding what they are allows you to be more effective and use your time where you need to, and maybe dial back at certain times where you need to. - Sure, that trust is key across the board, that trust that you have in them and the trust that they have in you. And the only way we really build that up is through those touch points. - I agree, and so touch point leadership I think is really important and again, we'd like to challenge people on here. We like to challenge our staff to find ways to do that. We're certainly available for you if you want to talk more about that, about different ways and I think don't overthink it. Like it's just getting out from behind wherever your workstation is. Whether that's calling somebody, Face timing them, video chatting them one-on-one and being a little bit unpredictable with when you're communicating with people and check on them. Maybe when they don't think they need it, but checking out on them just to make sure they are doing okay and saying, "Happy birthday," too it right? Celebrating someone like that makes you feel like a big part of the team. - Sir, I appreciate you giving me the time to really get that off my chest. It was definitely rattling in my brain today. So thanks, sir. - No, it's great. And so until next time everybody have a great day. (Paper rustling) (Soft music)