

Leadership Interview Write-Up

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Christienne Ruth, or Chris, is a close friend, coworker, and a leader I greatly admire. Chris led an accomplished career of over 20 years as an enlisted leader in the United States Air Force (USAF). Following an earlier-than-expected retirement from the USAF after experiencing a stroke at age 38, Chris is in her third year of civilian life and working as a program manager for a privately held software company. Throughout her time in the military, Chris served in varying levels of leadership at Air Force bases across the United States, Afghanistan, and England, and at her time of retirement held the esteemed rank of Senior Master Sergeant. She holds a master's degree in leadership and is currently pursuing a certificate in Agile program management to broaden her skillset as she continues adjusting to work in the private sector.

Though I know Chris well personally, it is only recently that our professional lives have intersected and much of her first career I knew of only on the periphery. What I have always known, though, is Chris's natural empathy and drive for human connection. This came out in our interview. Chris's insights, values, and reflections touched on many of the points Thomas et al. (2013) discuss in their definitions of trust and social cognition in relationship-based approaches to leadership and person-centered leadership as defined by Cardiff et al. (2018).

"Building trust is imperative and it's not fast," says Chris. "Relationship building is critical, and many people want to rush and get to work. I have to pause and focus on building [relationships] so that we can work effectively together." A core devotion to building trusting relationships shapes Chris's approach to leadership. She described how this approach was at times challenging to explain to peer leaders during her time in the Air Force. The USAF structure is rigid and focused on accomplishment, and Chris's role was to run units and work with people. "My boss above me would give directives; 'this is what you need to do, and this is

how it needs to be done, and this is how you have to report.’ I needed to translate it to be human-level.” Chris went on to explain the deeply engrained “go-do” culture of the military and how it affected the staff in her purveyance. Chris’s approach differed from that of her peer leaders; she worked to provide an explanation of directives and why they were important, which required time to communicate and build relationships with her unit. Initially viewed as a waste of time, Chris found that after 6 months in each assignment her peers began to see the value of her approach. “Telling people the ‘why’ when changes are made or they’re asked to do something is important. Having an explanation can really change how people feel valued,” Chris says.

Chris’s leadership approach is based in authenticity, respect, and the creation of safe space, balancing what Cardiff et al. (2018) call the directive and invitational stances of person-centered leadership. This is an approach she has carried with her to her new role as a civilian in private industry. “My leadership role now is so different,” she says. “In every position I’ve had I’ve been a leader in some capacity, but it changes based on the environment. With the Agile and flat organization I’m in now I have to be ready to change all the time and the group dynamic constantly shifts, which is new for me... Decision making has to evolve as my team does, and I’m continuing to focus on building relationships but it’s more stressful now because sometimes I have to be the bad guy when protecting feelings is damaging to the whole team or organization.”

The company for which Chris and I work has a staff made of former enlisted military folks, career DoD-civilians, engineers from Fortune 50 companies, and people like me who have spent their careers working for small, young companies. Our structure is still evolving, and our policies are flexible by design, leaving some employees who are used to bureaucracy feeling uncertain as they transition to our startup environment. Chris discusses these differences openly.

In her role as a program manager, Chris is responsible for meeting the requirements of contracts with government customers, which are typically lofty, highly specific and technical, and tied to hundreds of thousands of dollars- and they are accomplished by staff with a vastly different skillset than hers. “We are literally pushing forward every week here at [our company], which is cool but a big change. I have to learn how to include folks when they are needed and exclude them when they are not, which is not something I’ve ever had to do. I work with people who are really passionate and want to contribute, so when I have to ask them to step down or redirect them, it requires a lot of trust to be built,” she says.

Chris’s vision in her role today is to build relationships and to defend peoples’ rights to learn and grow. She believes in investing the time into creating close personal relationships in the workplace and has a vision that reflects the stages of trust and definitions of good quality relationships described by Thomas et al. (2013): dependability, reliability, and honesty, and mutual respect. It’s more than just a vision of being liked and having human connections, though. In Chris’s words, “Honesty is critical. People can’t make good decisions with bad information.” Chris’s vision of leadership is to build a strong organization, but as importantly, to authentically develop and impact the people she leads. “The biggest accomplishments are the peoples’ lives that I affected for so many years who still reach out to me to tell me about *their* accomplishments. I have no say or power to affect their career [in the AF] today because I’m out, but people still call me for advice or to tell me about their accomplishments and how I pushed them in that direction. Knowing that I made a difference in their lives or that they trust me so much that they’ll still ask for my opinion even though I can’t do anything for them in their career anymore is the biggest accomplishment of all of it.”

At the end of our interview, I asked Chris what advice she would give me both generally and as a coworker. Her first piece of advice encompassed communication in leadership as a whole: that your delivery of information is as, if not more important than your message. As an example, Chris described our company's recent announcement that COVID-19 vaccination is a required condition of employment. "Look at [our HR manager]'s delivery of conflict inducing news. Making yourself approachable and open invites dialog and participation," she said. Her second piece of wisdom was for me in particular: "Think of how people see you in their eyes."

Person-centered and relationship-focused leadership is rooted in kindness and humanity, which seems a radical departure from the stereotypical idea of a boss. Chris's example of investing energy into cultivating rapport, focusing on trust, and being a true leader of people is a wonderful model to witness. Her commitment to empathy and advice to do to same is a message we can take to heart in the library profession.

References

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