

The Weekly Take

You Oughta Know: Improving productivity starts with understanding your team

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Spencer Levy

What does it take to be a good leader these days? The defining qualities have been evolving. Does it take experience, toughness, quick thinking at times of high pressure, or is it something more? On this episode: a perspective on the dynamics of leadership and team building.

Dede Halfhill

Real leaders learn the art of responding, and they are not driven by just a reaction. And that takes practice and it takes awareness and it takes skill.

Spencer Levy

That's Dede Halfhill, a retired Air Force colonel with 25 years of command experience, who's now an executive coach and consultant. In Dede's distinguished military career, she served as an advisor on strategy and public affairs, with deployments in Iraq and at the highest level of the Department of Defense. In 2020, she brought the lessons of her experience into the corporate arena, where she says leaders need to adapt. Coming up, insights from the frontlines of leadership. Retired Colonel Dede Halfhill on understanding not just product metrics, but human metrics and becoming more emotion informed. I'm Spencer Levy and that's right now on The Weekly Take.

Spencer Levy

Welcome to The Weekly Take, Dede Halfhill. Thanks for coming out.

Dede Halfhill

Thank you for having me. I'm super excited to be here.

Spencer Levy

Well, leadership is a topic we've covered on The Weekly Take many times. Getting a wide swath of that definition, what might be a traditional means of leading or at least managing. Let's start there. The difference between managing and leading.

Dede Halfhill

You know, it's a great question and no, just to answer it right up front. It's not going away. Those things are very important in their time and space, right? As a leader, I have to be decisive. As a leader, sometimes the hierarchical structure of an organization is helpful. It keeps our processes moving the right way. It makes sure we stay on time. It makes sure our focus is on the right areas. I think it's really about adding to; it is not one or the other. It's an and. It's not either you lead through this hierarchical nature or you kind of lead in this soft, touchy space. That's what people think, right? Like I'm either going to be a leader

who has structure and I live and die by the hierarchical, bureaucratic kind of process that we have in place. Or I'm going to be a leader whose perceived as soft. And that's just not true. It's really about as leaders growing in our understanding of emotion so that we can tap into it as a resource the same way we tap into the other things we track. As a leader, I need to understand my financial metrics. I need to understand my product metrics. And I need to understand my human metrics. And so really, this is about being emotionally informed. As a leader, I want to be financially informed. I want to be informed on the process. And if I want to be successful going forward, if I want to be successful in tomorrow's environment, I have to be informed just as much on what is the emotional dynamic of my organization and how is it affecting my organization? And I have to really have a working knowledge of, where is emotion getting in my own way? Susan David says emotion is just data, and it is just one piece of data like all the other data we track. I'm a big fan of data. I'm a big fan of structure. I love a checklist like nobody's business. But as a leader, when I started to learn about emotion and I had a different language... You know, Dr. Brené Brown says that most of the time when you ask people what are three emotions they can identify, they identify happy, mad and sad. When as a leader, I increased my vocabulary around emotion, when I could identify the emotions I was experiencing with a little more granularity, when I got comfortable with those emotions, my own and those of my team, leadership actually became 100 times easier because I no longer felt like I had to figure it out all on my own. And I wasn't afraid to navigate emotion, the emotion of my team, because I felt skilled and equipped to do so. And in that it just was a huge burden lifted off my shoulders. Leadership became so much easier.

Spencer Levy

Most people are persuaded not by the numbers per se, but by how it feels in their gut. In fact, Jeff Bezos said, I make my most important decisions with my gut, not my head. Is that part of what you're saying?

Dede Halfhill

It's interesting because I think so much of the emotion we feel can show up in our gut. I think the really effective leaders who can navigate this space well can slow down long enough to listen to that gut feeling, but then also reality check it. When you have the skill to identify it. And you have the skill to name it. Like, this is what I'm feeling. This is a wider vocabulary of language. Am I feeling anxiety or am I feeling excitement? Before I get on stage, am I nervous or am I excited? Being able to really feel it and identify it and then name it appropriately gives me completely different options. If I'm feeling anxiety and nervous, what do I need to do to give myself a sense of calm? If I'm feeling excited, wow, what do I need to do to really capture that energy and bring it with me? It's no different in leadership. We feel these gut feelings. But I would argue we don't always name them correctly the first time and we don't reality check if they are serving us or not. And it's the ability to name and reality check where the real power happens.

Spencer Levy

I think when I described that a moment ago of the gut versus the head, I was speaking of the leader's emotions. But the word that you use often is empathy; is understanding your team's emotions. And I'm going to use a powerful word. And I think there is a connection here between the military service and the corporate work we're doing today, which is fear. I think that the most difficult moments in a military person's life, fear is a driving emotion. How do you marry the fear factor as a leader trying to overcome that? And is there a connection between the military fear and the fear people feel in the workplace?

Dede Halfhill

Fear, I would say, is kind of this secondary emotion that we know how to label. I'm feeling fear, but I'm going to use your example of AI. AI coming into the work environment makes us feel fear. When we don't have granularity on our emotions, we miss opportunities. And I'm going to offer this up just a little bit of a reframe. So Dr. Brené Brown says that the number one shame trigger at work, the number one shame trigger at work is fear of irrelevance. And think about AI and how much AI is causing people to ask themselves, am I becoming irrelevant? And if we start to fear that we are becoming irrelevant and it sends us into shame, that shame can show up in really unproductive ways. It can show up as me being a leader who thinks they have to have all the answers rather than sitting down with my team and really hearing what they have to say. It can show up in, I become an information hoarder instead of sharing information. And so when we don't have emotional granularity and we say something like AI is just making us all afraid, we miss an opportunity to say, is it fear or is it irrelevance? And if it's irrelevance, as a leader, I have so many different options for how to engage my team. I can help them see where the change will evolve and it won't make you irrelevant. I can talk about why does it make us feel irrelevant and where might we have skills and gifts that can be applied elsewhere? Or maybe it's not going to make you irrelevant at all. Because we do know that while AI is going to change some things, we are still going to need the human in a lot of it. And so there again, not having granularity really limits me as a leader. And so that's why I go back to like, as leaders, we spend, you know, the military or any of our education, you get an MBA, it teaches you all about the tactical parts of being in a corporate environment, right? Understanding the finance, understanding market, understanding product production. It should be teaching us how to have this emotional information, how to have this emotional knowledge, just the same. And it's deeper than a lot of times people will say, oh, you speak on EI, you know, emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is one thing, but we need to take it that step further to learn what does it look like to actually apply it? So I often like to say I want leaders who are emotion informed. You have the intelligence and you know how to apply it. And we're not doing that. We're not teaching enough in our organizations, in our educational systems about really the language of emotion, how to have granularity on it, how to recognize it, you know, increase the number of emotions we can actually recognize other than happy, sad and mad, so that I give myself a wider scope of problem solving opportunities.

Spencer Levy

Let's talk about some of those stories about where people were advised to give an uncomfortable conversation and just didn't do it. And how do you get them over that hump? How do you get them to have those conversations?

Dede Halfhill

It started with empathy. Just to give a quick recap of the story, we had received some guidance that the Air Force had given a disproportionate number of disciplinary actions to our black airmen and that it had done so for years. And so I shared the guidance with my commanders and asked them to have that conversation with their teams. Each of them were commanding organizations of about 2 to 300. And none of them had it. And I found that out by having a lunch with a group of my airmen and asking them, like, what did you think of the conversation? And to hear that none of the commanders had the conversation at first made me really angry. I was frustrated. This was an important topic. It's something we need to talk about. But then when I went back to my headquarters building and I pulled all of them together, I had time enough to slow down and to think about, who do I want to be as a leader? I want to be a leader who can meet them where they are. I want to be a senior leader who, when my direct reports are struggling, I'm there to help them versus just discipline them, right? Or go into the accountability conversation. I wanted to be a leader

who led with empathy. And so what that looks like was, I asked you to do this and you didn't; tell me what happened, right? First, I have to get curious. I have to collect information. And then honestly, as they started sharing, empathy looks like I know these are hard conversations to have. I know we don't always feel equipped to have them. I know we don't have all the answers. And then comes the accountability. But we're going to do it anyway. And so as leaders, when I wanted them to do this thing they didn't do, it would have been very easy, and I have a lot of people, especially in the military structure, who kind of give me a hard time that I didn't just read them the riot act. I asked you to have this conversation and you didn't, you know, start to kind of go down that accountability discussion of why they didn't have it. But instead I wanted to understand why was it hard and how do I support you in doing this hard thing? And I really think that's what we're missing. We talk a lot about leadership development, but we don't always talk about leadership support. What does it look like as senior leaders who are growing and developing younger leaders? What does it look like to really support them in their growth? And that conversation, or their lack thereof of having that conversation, was a great opportunity to slow down long enough and say, what would it look like to support them in their growth in this area? So we had a conversation. It starts with... it started with curiosity. I asked you to do this and you didn't: tell me why. Then you go into the empathy: I know it's hard.

Spencer Levy

Do they end up having the conversation?

Dede Halfhill

They did.

Spencer Levy

I say your most important partner is not the yes person. It's the no person. And nobody likes to be criticized. Nobody likes to be told no. Nobody likes to be told they made a mistake. But I told them that in my experience, if I'm in a zone of trust, not only do I crave feedback that may be negative, it's the most valuable thing of all. Do you approach it that way?

Dede Halfhill

I think you're spot on as, especially the more senior you get. The more senior you get, the more that really honest, candid feedback is important. I did find, however, it would be really hard if I sat down with my team and I would say, what am I doing, what am I doing that I could do better? Right. Tell me where I'm missing the boat. They would all be like, no, everything's great.

Spencer Levy

In a team setting. But if you took them one on one, maybe differently.

Dede Halfhill

Well, I think the way, I think it was still hard. And so here's what I started to do. I'm struggling in this area, give me some advice. What do you think I should do? And then they would give you the feedback disguised as advice. That was one technique, when I would ask them, hey, I'm wondering if I'm connecting the way I want to connect. Can you give me any advice? And then they would kind of let you know the things they probably would have told you as feedback, but weren't comfortable telling you as feedback because you've kind of couched it in this idea of support and advice. And then I would also say, I think I'm at a three on my public speaking. What do you think would take me to a four?

And then they would usually give me one or two things. So I think as senior leaders, we almost have to be a little tricky in getting the feedback we really need, but we have to really make it a safe environment for them to give it to us because there is a power differential. Even if we think we've created a culture where feedback is open and honest and it's accessible, there is still a power differential. I had the power of their evaluation and I'm just being very blunt about it, right? Like I held their evaluations and it's hard for people to be truly candid and open when there is still a power differential. And there was. There always will be when you're in a hierarchical organization where you have rank and position and authority. And if we don't talk about that power differential, whether that's in any dynamic, whether it's evaluations, whether it's in position or whatnot, then we're never going to get the open, honest feedback we really want.

Spencer Levy

Let's talk about another emotion. These are all probably subcategories, the first three you mentioned. Pressure. High pressure. And I can imagine very few situations that are more high pressure than military combat. And you were in Iraq. Does your advice change in high pressure environments?

Dede Halfhill

You know, I get the question a lot like, oh, that's great that you talk about feelings, but we got to take the hill, like no one's talking about feelings, right? And that's when I say it's our job as leaders to have discernment. There are time and places to have these conversations. When I'm in a high pressure environment and it's a crisis situation, I get directive as the next person. I'm as decisive as the next leader. And there are times where that directness is absolutely critical. The trick then, I shouldn't say the trick, but the skilled leader understands that after that moment, now we have to go back and we have to make sure. How is everyone doing? Are we connected? Is there anything we need to clean up? Did anything... like sometimes when I would get really stressed, I have very little time to listen and that was something I have to be aware of. I tend to, when I'm really under stress, go, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I know, I know that already. We talked about this already and I cut people off and I get very short. I had to be aware of that. And even in those moments of stress, I have to be cognizant of, am I showing up in my old patterns, in my old behaviors, so that I don't have to clean up as much afterwards? But I still get that way sometimes, like when I'm really under a lot of stress, I am not, I'm very directive and I'm not the nicest person sometimes, right? And so I have to be really aware of that because that's not who I want to be. And I actually want to be the kind of leader who is more skilled at understanding the space so I can respond to something versus just react in the moment. Real leaders learn the art of responding and they are not driven by just a reaction. And that takes practice and it takes awareness and it takes skill, all of which you can learn. But you have to be humble enough to know that you have some things to unlearn and brave enough to learn the things you need to learn.

Spencer Levy

My father taught me once, taught me a lot of things, and one of the things he said was, the moment you get angry is the moment you are wrong. Even if it's a high pressure situation, even if your policy or position is objectively correct. And I'm hesitant to use this word, but I'm going to use it: weakness. Because the minute I raise my voice, the minute I get mad, I feel that the whole conversation has gone from substance to something much, much worse. What do you think?

Dede Halfhill

I think, one, you're not alone. That is the journey most of us are trying to figure out. Like when I just get angry and I react out of anger, I don't know who I'm alienating in that moment. I don't know who is losing trust in me. I don't know how I'm degrading the kind of environment we need to have where people feel brave and safe, because I'm reacting. To respond in anger is a reaction. When you learn these skills, and it takes practice, but when you learn them, you also can learn tools to give yourself time and space to take care of your needs so you're not just reacting. One of my favorite questions is tell me more. Because it just, in so many cases, it's the magic question to get to a deeper level, whether that's on a human interaction or whether it's a product discussion, right? Like, tell me more. What have we not talked about? It's a magic question in so many places in life. And there were many times, there still are, I mean, I use it with my partner all the time because if he says something and it triggers me to anger, right? If I immediately, something will be said and my first reaction is anger, I am practiced enough now that the very first thing that comes out of my mouth is tell me more, when I want to say, well, you didn't do the dishes yesterday either, you know. Instead, the very first reaction is, tell me more. What that gives me is that gives me time to breathe. It gives me time to remember goodness will come from curiosity. There is magic in curiosity, and it gives me time to find my empathy. And so it has just become kind of a magic thing that comes out of my mouth all the time. And as leaders, when we are responding in anger, it's probably because we haven't done the work to get curious about what's causing the situation. And we haven't gotten curious about our own fear, right? Our own degree of vulnerability or our own shame.

Spencer Levy

You used the word touchy just a moment ago, and I'm actually a little surprised you used that word, because what we're talking about here is something... in the beginning of this conversation you used a different phrase; soft or something that is not, I don't want to use the word frivolous, but something that is not hard, not based on the numbers. Are we trying to get to these touchy topics and keep it real in a way that we can actually discuss them?

Dede Halfhill

Are we trying?

Spencer Levy

Yeah.

Dede Halfhill

I hope so. I really hope so. Because, you know, it's funny, we call these soft skills, but they are the hardest thing I ever did in my military career. Iraq was easy compared to the unlearning and learning I had to do as a leader to be the kind of leader who could navigate these skills. Are we trying to get to a place where we can have these conversations? I hope so, because if we don't, they are derailing us. If we can learn how to have these conversations in a way that is productive, in a way that is inclusive, in a way that brings people to a sense of connection, that is only going to be a benefit. There is no downside. There's no downside to being able to have sticky, hard conversations. The downside to not having them is we lose good talent. The downside to not having them is we have resentment on our teams. The downside to not having them is we lack trust. I mean, there's so many downsides to not having the conversation. But give me one downside to being teammates and leaders who can.

Spencer Levy

Well, again, we're having a conversation here. I think there is a downside: short term. I think the short term downside is saying no to somebody, right? And you're going to hurt

their feelings if you say no in the moment. But over the long term, you're going to build everything you've just suggested. You're going to build that trust, if you do it in the right environment, if you're empathetic with your employees. And I think from an emotional standpoint as a leader, you're often putting too much weight on the short term and not enough on the long term, which is what you're espousing. Is that a way to frame it?

Dede Halfhill

I love how you said that. And I would ask when you said there is a short term downside. To whom? The leader or the person hearing no? Is it hard for me as a leader to say no, and that's the downside? Or is it hard as the person hearing, no, is it hard to hear it? And I will tell you, if I feel heard, if I feel seen, and if I feel valued as an employee, I can hear no. That is not a downside. If you tell me no, but I feel seen, feel valued, feel heard, most of the time I can accept that. I would offer the downside is, as leaders, we're uncomfortable sometimes saying no. We're uncomfortable with having to say the hard thing because we're worried it's going to have a negative consequence. We're not going to be liked. We're not going to be, you know, we're going to hurt the team. The problem isn't saying no. The problem is those other skills and our ability to make our team feel seen, heard and valued.

Spencer Levy

You used the word a minute ago, inclusivity, which is a word that's very important and we use it a lot. But I think you also brought up some examples in today's discussion of people come from different backgrounds. And we can go into different categories: male or female, different races, different religions, different, everything's different. And sometimes they put up a barrier, and the barrier they put up is not that you don't want to keep it real with somebody, but you don't want to keep it real in a way that might make a mistake. Might say something that hurts their feelings, offends them is the worst case, right? How do we overcome that?

Dede Halfhill

I hope we don't overcome it. I hope we learn to appreciate it. It's not just something that has to be overcome and move past it. When we get to a place where we can really embrace it and include it and appreciate what that does for us, I think that's the end goal. Being able to be leaders who go, man, I have a ton of diversity and it makes us better for it. When I was commanding at Barksdale Air Force Base, I was the mission support group commander there, I had the most diverse leadership team on the base. It made us so much stronger because we had so many different perspectives. We learned to build trust and really appreciate that diversity in each other. We very rarely got caught up in groupthink because there were so many different backgrounds and so many different experiences that we were being challenged constantly. Those diverse experiences and backgrounds and beliefs come up as a benefit when you've created an environment where they can be shared. Have you created a psychologically brave space, safe space so that people feel comfortable sharing their dissenting opinions or their diverse opinions? It's not just about diversity. It's about creating the kind of environment where that diversity is valued and the products and belief systems that come from that diversity is valued.

Spencer Levy

I think that there's no daylight between our opinions on diversity and its value, but I think there still is a barrier. I think there still is a fear factor to have conversations with people of different backgrounds. What is a tactical thing somebody can do to overcome that?

Dede Halfhill

Who's fear factor? Who do you think is most afraid?

Spencer Levy

I think the leader is most afraid. I think the leader does not want to be perceived in any way as judging somebody differently based upon their background. How do we get these leaders to have these conversations?

Dede Halfhill

100%. We need to be having them.

Spencer Levy

Yeah.

Dede Halfhill

My two biggest takeaways are we have to have the humility to acknowledge that our lived experiences may not be the same as others. Like, what do we believe and why do we believe it? How do we get curious about our beliefs so we can challenge them? And you know, I'll give you an example. I thought I was pretty comfortable talking about race. I thought I was pretty skilled at talking about race. And then I was at home one night on Facebook and I saw a post and it said stupid things white girls say to black women. And I read the post and I saw myself. I was like, oh, I say those things. I've been that person. I immediately went into shame. I can't believe I've done that. I can't believe I did this. Here's the skill leaders need. Does that experience shut me down? Does that experience make me go, I don't ever want to have that conversation? I'm not good at this, I'm just not going to have the conversation. Or does that conversation open me up through humility and make me ask myself, I didn't know I was doing that, now I do. Where do I need to go to learn better? How do I get curious about why this meme even exists? I mean, this meme exists because obviously someone put it together and we're saying things we didn't even know we were saying that are hurtful. And so I have to have the humility as a leader to know I may not understand the situation fully and how do I open myself up to learn what I need to learn and how do I unlearn things I may have learned maybe just by product of my upbringing and the culture I grew up in, and the community I grew up in. I may have very deeply learned some things that I need to unlearn. And when I saw that post, I very much realized that was the case. Then I have to do the work. I have to do the work to find the right thought leaders, to read the right books, to ask more questions. I don't want to say the right, because that puts a lot of pressure on it. But like, how do I get more curious and find out why are those things hurtful? And so for the hard conversations we need to have, leaders aren't having them because they're scared. They feel vulnerable. So how do we recognize that in ourselves? Recognize what is making us most uncomfortable and then do the work we need to do to unpack that.

Spencer Levy

So the answer, an answer, not the answer, but an answer is to be introspective. To look inside yourself. You're from Iowa, right? And there is a perception of people from Iowa. I think about the movie Field of Dreams and the cornfield and just the values that are exuded from that film. How do you pair your upbringing with your military service and where you are today? How do you bring the best of it forward and how do you learn from some of those things that maybe shouldn't be brought forward?

Dede Halfhill

I think it goes, I mean, it's a great question, but it goes back to what you just said, which is the introspection. Where are the lessons and the stories I have supporting me, and where are they getting in my own way? I'll give you an example. I grew up in Dubuque, Iowa. It's a very German town, very rural, so there is a very strong work ethic, right? You get up, you get your lazy butt off the couch. I can hear my mother in my voice in my head all the time. And you get to work. And work ethic is very important. Like, you get your worthiness from productivity. That certainly served me well. It continues to serve me well. I get up in the morning and sometimes my partner jokes around. I get up like an hour before him and he'll come downstairs and I'm already like, okay, what's our plan for the day? And you can't see me on the audio, but I got the hand chop, right? Like, what's our plan for the day? What's our schedule? What are we getting done?

Spencer Levy

And by the way, just by that hand chop, I'm getting it done.

Dede Halfhill

I know. That's how I do it, too. I come downstairs, I'm like, what's our plan? What are we going to do? You know, what's your task list? What's my task list? That serves me. That is a part of my upbringing that has been very helpful. When does it not serve me? When I need to take a break and I realize that I could just lay around on a Saturday all day to refuel? Where does it support me and where does it get in my way? And there are times that upbringing, that worthiness through productivity, burned me out because I didn't know how to rest. I didn't know how to have fun. I still don't have hobbies. In fact, I'm on the hunt for hobbies because I retired from the military about two years ago and I'm trying to figure out what my hobbies might be because that work ethic was so strong in me, I never took time for joy. And all of the research now shows us that joy is a huge component of burnout.

Spencer Levy

We only have a few minutes left and I'm going to ask, any examples you can give? Any corporate leaders, any case studies, anybody that you've run into in your career that you admire. That you said this person exemplifies these characteristics.

Dede Halfhill

I will give you one that I really admire and I'm just so beyond grateful for. I worked for a gentleman named General Robin Rand. I met him when he was a colonel. He ended up retiring as a four star. And for me, he really epitomizes what it means to be a leader who learned this along the way and kind of transitioned. When I met him as an O-6, a colonel, he was very matter of fact, very facts based, you know, very much like, here's the data. He then spent a year in Iraq. He was the commander of Balad Air Base where the major hospital was located in Iraq, which means on a weekly basis, he would go over to the hospital and he would visit with the wounded men and women. That experience changed him. He came back from that experience, and now as a leader, can navigate emotion in a way I don't see many leaders. He can really connect to people because he connects to their emotion. And I had the opportunity to talk to him about it, and we kind of got back to this space of Iraq. And what I realized is, Iraq broke him open in a way that really resulted in that post-traumatic growth. I think we need to be teaching leaders these things so that we don't have to rely on the hard moments to break us open. We can actually be deliberate in learning these skills without having to go through those hard experiences. And General Robin Rand is the kind of leader who showed me what it can look like to be a man in touch with your humanity and still be an amazing leader.

Spencer Levy

There's an old expression, and I'm not sure who said this one. It is that adversity does not create character, it reveals it. So what you're suggesting is that this individual revealed his character when faced with some pretty devastating situations.

Dede Halfhill

Yeah, he was amazing.

Spencer Levy

So we're just about out of time here. I'm just going to ask you a final wrap up question. We have listening to this show real estate professionals, primarily real estate, some of the other business professionals, trying to take your advice on how to best move forward as a better leader. How would you sum it up?

Dede Halfhill

Oh, goodness. If I could give one piece of advice, it would be don't shy away from doing the inner work. Don't shy away from the things that might scare you when it comes to emotion, because when you can navigate it, you unlock so much potential and opportunity. So, don't shy away from it.

Spencer Levy

Well, on behalf of The Weekly Take, what a terrific conversation we just had today with Dede Halfhill, former military leader. Thank you for your service. Great corporate leadership trainer. Thank you so much Dede, great conversation.

Dede Halfhill

Thank you.

Spencer Levy

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