



Lessons in High Trust Leadership

CONVERSATION WITH
BLUE ANGELS CAPTAIN GEORGE DOM

STORY KRISTYN HARTMAN

LESSONS OF DISCOVERY COME TO US IN ALL MANNER OF WAYS. DURING a robust discussion with KaiserAir Director of Business Development Rick Brainard about our nation's leadership challenges, he recommended that I watch a TED Talk by Blue Angels Captain George Dom on the subject of high trust leadership.

I watched the 13-minute video "Achieving More With Trust" three times back-to-back with rapt attention. A leadership consultant and popular speaker on the subject since his retirement as a Blue Angels leader, Captain Dom had identified and developed five simple tools for effective "high trust leadership" that anyone can apply. Leaders, teams, support talent. He'd coined it all so beautifully.

"What I came to understand is that my teammates, every day, were asking five simple questions about me," he explains in the TEDx Sonoma video, "and based on the answers they got they would make a decision to what degree they were going to trust me ... and I believe those are the same five questions that your team is asking about you ... In order to be trusted you must be trustworthy." I listened as he outlined and offered examples of the five questions.

CHARACTER.

"Do I walk my talk?"

COMMITMENT.

"Will I be with them when times are rough?"

COMPETENCE.

"Am I good enough to lead them?"

CONNECTION.

"Do they believe I understand them?"

COMMUNICATION.

"Am I clear, concise, and direct?"

If our political and business leadership applied these tools, I thought, we could solve so many problems and conflicts. I replayed the video again and again. But the more I replayed his talk, the more my thoughts turned from how deficient is our national leadership to my own leadership deficiencies. There were so many things he spoke about as a Blue Angels leader that we — nay, I, need to repair and improve on before pointing the finger at anyone else. I copied them into my special notebook, determined to look at them, think about them, and try my best to apply them every single day. But I had to know more.

A few weeks later, with direct help from Rick, *KA Confidential Magazine* Art Director Kitty Nicholason and I found ourselves visiting with Captain Dom at his corporate hangar.



KITTY NICHOLSON

The High Trust Leader

"Call me George," he said, instantly likable as we followed him into the pristine hangar. Taller than we'd expected for a fighter-jet pilot, "George" gave us a brief tour of the facility, describing the different jets he flies.

"High trust is where the magic happens," he said, as we made our way back to the lobby area. He glanced at his watch before he sat down across from us, so I opened up my notebook to the "5Cs" and launched right in by asking if he thinks the five are limited to professional applications.

"No, every relationship," he said. "I believe that those five questions are being asked about all of us by anyone who is in a significant relationship with us. They may not realize they're asking them, but they are. How much does this matter to you? Are you here for only you? For the team? This resonates with everyone. If there's a problem in a team, you'll find the source of the problem in one or more of these five. Every single time."

What makes one squadron or one company more efficient or successful than another? "When I drilled down to find out what it is that sets them apart, I found this inherent sense of trust." He explained that trust isn't something you take on and off, rather "it is something we have to practice" all of the time.

"That's why I dislike the term work-life balance, its *all* life balance to me," he said. "I don't see them as separate, I see them as one. And because there are seasons to our lives, there are different priorities in those different seasons."

He added that it is never too late for training, especially leadership training. "In the military we're all about training, right? Because it works. So, if training works, then how do we proactively train for leadership? I believe, when it comes to the big stuff we will do the right thing, you know, everyone is watching; but how about the little tiny things every day? That's where we really make a difference."

Character

"Do I walk my talk?" He asked. "The thing most people miss when they leave the military, is the real sense of being able to trust the guy and gal next to you. You know you can depend on them to carry out the mission in accordance with what they're supposed to do. Lives depend on it. Once you've experienced that level of trust as the norm, you never forget it, ever."

I wondered if that was also a factor for service men and women transitioning back into civilian life.

"We can bring that sense of trust back to business, governance, communities, families," he declared. "We have the tools. We just have to practice."

We listened as he shared example after example of character, of “doing what you say you’re going to do; of living your life with the same virtues you talk about.”

He shared some of the challenges he faced when winning the trust of his team when he first joined them as their leader, call sign “Boss,” beginning with the first of the 5Cs: Character. “It didn’t happen overnight; it took time and consistency. When is your character set? Never. Are you better than you were yesterday; and tomorrow better than today? It’s an ongoing process.”

Commitment

“Will I be with them when times are rough?” He told us about a show his Blue Angels team was scheduled to fly on a particularly nasty day with such high winds that he almost cancelled the performance. After much consideration, he decided they’d go up but was prepared to cut it short if at any time he felt it unsafe.

“We went up and... well, we went into this one maneuver and I was just fighting the turbulence thinking, man, if I’m struggling with it this much, how’s my team doing?” His hand was in a tight fist. “I look in my mirrors and this is what I see.” He pulled up a closeup image on his laptop screen.

“They were right there, everyone right where they were supposed to be. That’s the commitment part, remember? Will I be with them when times are tough? Yes,” he said emphatically, “and they were there with me. Leadership works both ways.”

“Do you fly by the numbers? How close are the planes when you’re in formation?” Kitty asked.

George nodded, accustomed to the questions. “About two feet or so,” he said, then explained that the words painted on the sides of the jets are strategically placed as reference markers for the pilots when flying in formation.

Kitty, the queen of type, gasped. “What? All those sophisticated instruments and they’re looking out their windows at a space between letters of type on a plane two feet away from them? Type?”

George laughed out loud, pointing to a closeup image of a wingtip view. “If he sees that letter there, he’s too far back and adjusts an inch or two forward. If he doesn’t see this letter, he inches back.”

“Inch or two? While doing loop-de-loops at the speed of ... really fast?” Kitty was grinning ear to ear. “Incredible... type. So, you guys are actually flying those jets. I mean, really flying them! You have to really





trust that the other guys are where they're supposed to be at any given... fraction of a second..."

"Exactly," George affirmed. "Trust."

Competence

"Am I good enough to lead them?" He asked. "Most hiring decisions in companies are based first on competence, which is extremely important, right? But I put it third for a reason because without those first two, Character and Commitment, this third one doesn't count. If you can walk your talk and can be counted on, you can be taught what you need to know."

He explained that competence comes from purpose and practice, "and we're always practicing. Because we're creatures of habit, we gain competence from practicing and training. And you have to have a willingness to accept constructive feedback. You know, as we get more successful there can be an unwillingness to receive feedback."

The Blue Angels are famous for their hour to two-hour debrief after every flight. "It is sacred," George declared. "We didn't do anything until we had that debrief. Our ritual was, nobody was allowed in the room except the people involved in the flight. We wanted people to be absolutely open and candid and honest. While honesty is important when building the level of trust we needed, we also need candor." He repeated "candor" several times, emphasizing its importance.

"We're moving so fast, literally, that if I had to ask for the truth, it was too late by the time I got it, right? I needed people to bring me the truth when I needed

to hear it, which I define as candor. If you authorize someone to bring you the truth, you'll get it once. But whether you get it again depends on how you respond to that truth. Think about that."

He described how those debriefs work. "We sit around the conference table and I would say a couple things about the overall event or show and then I would share what were the significant mistakes — that I was aware of — that I'd made during that flight. I start with that. It's okay to make mistakes as long as you recognize them and commit yourself to fixing whatever the problem was; it also gave me the moral authority to expect them to be as candid about gaps in their own performance. And I had to be willing to accept their critique of my performance. If I was making a mistake and didn't realize it, we've got a problem. If I was making a mistake and not willing to admit it, we've got another problem. Because your team knows. You can't fool them. Who wants to follow someone who is unwilling to admit when they're wrong?"

He said that for all the critiquing, that they all ended their comments with the exact same words: "And I'm glad to be here. I'm glad to be here. Reminds us what a privilege it is to be part of this organization. I'm glad to be here. Gratitude is powerful. Oh, and because everyone knew they would have a chance to speak, no one felt the need to interrupt."

He talked about stages of learning from unconsciously incompetent, to consciously incompetent, to consciously competent, then unconsciously competent. "That's the point where you're not getting into the airplane, you're strapping it on! But then, in order to grow, to continue learning, you go through it again," he said.

"I often ask people in my workshops, when was the last time you did something for the first time? When you really had to hang it out there? Too many people today are stuck, too afraid to hang it out there, which is too bad. You know, most people are pretty forgiving if they know you're doing your best, really doing your best."

Connection

"Do they believe I understand them?" He asked, reaching for a pen. Excitedly, I placed my special notebook in front of him. I was keeping this. He did a quick sketch of the six-man formation, numbering each triangle, explaining the commands and cadence.

"The delta formation, all six of us, come together at the end. We're flying so close together that I don't do anything with the stick or the throttle without first giving them a command of execution because they're so close to me that if they waited to see the airplane move and react to that, we would hit each other." He moved his hands together. "So, I'm doing this sing-song cadence so that they are moving their controls at the same time I'm moving mine. Lets say I'm going to roll





the formation, I'll say *Oooooh-kaaay*. The *Oooooh* is preparatory and on the *kaaay* we all move our sticks at the same time and off we go."

We learned that the wingmen don't get to talk on the radio other than to respond to commands using their call sign. All they can say is their name. And they can't sound frustrated when they do, either.

"I was out on a practice, and I screwed up a maneuver," he said, making waving motions with his hands. "So, we're setting up for the next maneuver. The guys behind me are wondering, where is his head right now? Is he getting ready for the next maneuver or is he still thinking about this last one that he screwed up, right? And, yes, I'm thinking, man, that sucked! And I'm angry at myself but I also want to protect my little ego here by showing my frustration, but I know the rule, and I know they're wondering what I'm going to sound like when I make the next radio call. So, when I key the mic, I'm very positive, you know, we're setting up for the barrel roll brake or whatever it was, and it just struck me,

how just by saying the words in a positive way allowed me to flush that last mistake, to put it behind me, and get ready for the next maneuver. So it works. Do feelings affect behavior or does behavior affect feelings? Both, it is both."

He reflected on another challenging early training event with his Blue Angels team. "The ability to fly at that level of precision and do it every day is, well, you can bring it once, but to have to bring it every day? When those canopies come down, every day, everyone has to be present. How do you manage yourself physically, mentally, spiritually to bring it every day?

Here I am learning new maneuvers and every day my wingmen are telling me about all these mistakes that I'm making and I'm already bummed about the ones I know I'm making and here they're telling me more that I don't know I'm making? We're all human, right?"

We could've listened to him all day.

"Finally, after a couple weeks I said, come on you guys, really? Don't you see I'm trying as hard as I can

here? I was so blessed to have wingmen who were professional and courteous but who never shied away from holding up the mirror to me, and they said, 'roger that Boss, we know you're trying as hard as you can, but we don't grade on effort, we grade on performance, and in these four maneuvers, you sucked!' All I could say was, roger that!

"So it was really challenging for me personally, but I was so lucky that these guys never made it personal," he explained, "and I had to keep reminding myself every day — because my nature is, well, I just want to get pissed off, but I had to remind myself that he's not telling me this to make himself look good, rather he wants me to get better so that we all get better. Use language that doesn't make it personal; and conversely, don't take the feedback personal."

Communication

"Am I clear, concise, and direct?" He asked. "Listening is the most fundamental skill needed for high trust leadership. Are you communicating in a way they can understand you? Don't assume that because you communicated your message that it was understood."

He scrolled through some photos and stopped on a tight shot of the jets. "It's not the technology that makes all this happen, it's the people ... and a culture of unconditional high trust. See how close my wingtips are right above their heads?" That's high trust.

"And no matter how good your team, no matter how good your relationship, you can always make it better," he said.

"We've got unprecedented levels of low trust across this country," he continued. "Without trust,

there's a fear of communication and avoidance of accountability. From Wall Street to Washington to Main Street and everywhere in between, but it doesn't have to be that way. If you're a high trust leader and given the task of taking the hill? Everyone wants to go with you, to be part of a mission with someone they can trust. If you can't find good people, well, look in the mirror. Who are you reflecting? Who are you attracting? In order to be trusted, you must be trustworthy. Are you here to win or are you here to play? We're here to win. And if we're going to win, as leaders, we need to get better about talking about the why, why we're here to win. We're great at talking about the what, but to lead? We better be able to communicate the why."

Kitty asked if they ever deviate from their planned shows. He laughed, shaking his head no, but later admitted that it was him and his Blue Angels team that buzzed the San Francisco 49ers game after flying an air show in 1997, greatly annoying sports announcer John Madden, known to dislike airplanes of any kind. "That's why he never went to the Pro Bowl; can't get to Hawaii by bus," George said, adding that his Blue Angels made "Madden's All Stars" as "MVP" for their surprise fly-by.

George returned his attention to the 5Cs, kindly answering each and every last one of our questions. To say that we were inspired by all that he shared would be an understatement; we left with so much more. A proven set of tools with which to navigate a path toward high trust leadership. Can we do it? We're committed to trying, that's for sure. KA

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