

## Transcription - Kevin Eikenberry Part 2

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Welcome back. I'm Kim baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. We're continuing our conversation this week with Kevin Eikenberry. We're covering how much risk and safety and trust you can have in your organization and within your teams.

One of the things that we used that I thought was really good is different topics. So we'll have a get together even before the videos, things like the phone even, as a group, we weren't talking about anything transactional, but we're talking about success sharing. What did your success look like? And people will just share that. Another one was pure storytelling, like what you just did with the story with Tom Peters. What we're doing is, we're sharing information through interaction rather than transaction.

So at the start of our monthly team meeting, just to be very practical here, the start of our monthly team meeting, we meet as a whole team only once a month, I mean, at least on a scheduled sort of basis, right? And at the start of that meeting, and just to give everybody context, there's currently 13 of us, and so at the start of that meeting, I have some sort of very random question, right, that is somehow topical. I don't know. Like I know what it was the other day, because the other day we had our meeting on National Oreo Day. You guys have Oreos?

We do. They're not mainstream.

Okay, well, so I said, okay, it's National Oreo Day. Here's the thing, everybody's got four questions, pick one of these four questions and they were all Oreo related. And basically what happens is, people tell a story. The questions were like, you have an Oreo story, what's your favorite kind of Oreo? Where do Oreos come from? Because there's different flavors, right? And the US is like where would Oreos rate on your favorite cookies? And then how do you eat them? Because you have some people pull them apart and do lots of stuff. So like I said, pick one of those things and tell us. And so everyone talks for like 45 seconds, a minute.

There's laughter. We found out that some people couldn't care less about Oreos. We found out some people, it's they're very favorite cookie on the planet. And in like eight minutes, we had a laugh, we got an insight into each other. We had some new sort of fodder for just conversation and then we got down to business. And that eight minutes is as important and interesting as the business.

I used to use it, a lot of my corporate life was in public speaking and teaching engineers and architects to speak better. And they were all pretty stiff. The icebreaker that I used for that, which was the most successful icebreaker I have used in 40 years of teaching public speaking, was to ask people if they had a middle name, what it was, how they got it and if they had their choice, what would it be?

Anything but what it is. There's my answer.

My favorite is that I don't have one. It was easy for me.

That's unfair.

What actually happened is that they all decided by the end of the session, they all decided what my middle name should be. There's one I would like to have, but they decided on something else. But one of the most memorable times of that was we had an engineer who was Chinese born and bred and had come to this country as a migrant. He worked as a taxi driver and he was just a phenomenal quality systems manager and phenomenal brain. And he worked his way through so that he got to be able to use these other skills, but he told us, and nobody knew, everyone was afraid of him because they thought he's the brains of the outfit, and this was an opportunity for them to find out something about him. He said, well, my name is Steven Wong. Obviously Steven is not my given name. I have a Chinese name, but when I came to this country and I was a taxi driver, I needed something that was an easy English sounding name and the only name that I knew in English was R.L. Stevenson, Robert Louis Stevenson. I just shortened it because Stevenson obviously was too long. So I just said, I'm Steven. And that's what he became. People were quite fascinated, not only with the story, but with the reasoning behind the story. So it gives them that, as Fulyana said, it's a different kind of information and education that you're imparting just by that easy exercise, that non threatening exercise.

Yes.

I love that. It's a great story.

And it led me to needing to read the complete works of Robert Louis Stevenson. I am 90% through.

I'm going to move on to question two. Question two is about risk focus. This, once again, is as a result of some of the other guests we've had more recently that are talking about a change in management styles and leadership styles and being, as you talked about yourself, more flexible in terms of our approach. So how can leaders use risk to drive teams forward and should they?

Well, risk is a natural part of life, right? So I think what we want to do is we want to be clear as leaders about what risk means to us. And I think we want to be clear with our teams much like we would as a parent. And I'm not saying that we should treat our teams as children. That's not what I'm saying. But what I am saying is that I believe that most parents want to intelligently expose our children to risks, right? Maybe not physical risks, but risks, psychological risks, things to stretch us to help us grow and beyond our current comfort zone and all those sorts of things. So I'm using risk in sort of a lower case "r" way here, right?

I think that as a leader, we have to number one, not shield our team from the realities of the world. Number two, I think that we have to intelligently offer them opportunities to do things that are risky, right? Including things like giving a speech, right? Speaking in front of the executive committee when they're a new leader, right, or new supervisor or whatever, that's a risk as seen by that person. And so we've got to give people the chance to take risks. And we have to help them understand that it's in that risky time, that is where growth can happen because if we stay in our comfort zone without risk, there will be no growth and it really is an end.

We have to provide the net too, right? There's been a lot of talk in the last 15 years, 10 years, 15 years about psychological safety. I'm not talking about that. One of our clients for many years here in the US was Cirque du Soleil. So if you, for anyone who's listening, if you don't know what Cirque du Soleil is, but if you do, you do.

And if you don't, think circus, okay, for the purposes of this conversation. So if you're at a Cirque du Soleil show where there are people high in the air on bicycles or trampolines or trapezes or whatever, they're high in the air, there's a net. Now they do a really good job of hiding it, like you have to really be paying attention. You won't see that it's there, but trust me, it's there. That net is their number one because it's an ethical thing, like we better have a net, right? And there's a legal reason in the United States and then everywhere else the world. Here in the US, we would call it, it would be called OSHA, but there's like the government says you're going to have a net. Ethically, you're going to have a net, but you know what the third reason why the net is so important? Because the net gives us, as an audience, a better show because the risks are now manageable. So people will do three flips on the wire rather than two, because they know that the worst thing that can happen is that they'll fall in the net. And so because I'm having the net, people will try more things, they will work a little harder, they will come closer to their potential. And so as a leader, it's our opportunity and responsibility to introduce, make people aware of, create opportunities for risk and give them that.

Do you find with the organizations that you're working with more recently, I guess, than over time, that safety net is not predominantly there?

No, I don't think with our clients, I don't see that, I don't see that, I don't know that I see that. I think that it's generally good news that we talk more about things like psychological safety than we did 15 years ago. And so, no, you know, my first reaction to your question is no, I don't think so. Is there a reason you asked that?

We do case studies when we have listeners sending something that they're struggling with. We seem to have had a thread of them in the last few years where people are concerned about taking an action because they don't feel like they're in a safe environment. Don't feel like they're in a trusting environment, I guess is probably closer to the mark. I just wonder whether you'd see that.

Yeah, so I'm glad I asked the follow because I think there's something there that's worth us talking about for a second. And that is that I think that employees, people, are more willing to ask that question or to think about that than they would have been 20 years ago. I'm not sure there's actually less safety than there was before, but I think the bar of what people are expecting is higher. Does that make sense?

Yeah, it does. It does. And I think it will certainly resonate with our listeners and give them something to think about it because we have struggled to try and find a way to explain to them that perhaps it's their perception of where they are because they're under stress about their ideas, those sorts of things. We had a case study very recently where a fellow had an idea that was going he knew was going to be an industry disruptor and he didn't feel comfortable about bringing it up in his own organization. But that's all he told us and so we had all these questions about why, why don't you want to bring it up, you know, what's the

stumbling block?

I would say two things. One is, if you're a person that's not feeling safe, acknowledge it. That's how you feel. That's the first thing. And I would encourage you to think what's truly the worst thing that would happen if you share it. Like I think that sometimes we calamitise things or we make assumptions about what will happen that may or may not be true. And I would say to you, if you're a leader and you're saying in your head, well, that wouldn't happen in my organization, it's possible that it would. And even if you're saying I wouldn't even roll my eyes, I want to hear that you need to acknowledge the fact that that could be how people feel. And so that perception difference is important. And so that becomes something that we, as leaders, can then work on.

How do we continue to build trust at a higher level so that people do feel comfortable? And it does mean that whenever little things happen, we can't roll our eyes and we can't, you know, sort of do anything that would even be misconstrued as being unsafe and I think that's a really important point. And I think that I would just say this to people on both sides of that, and that is that what we're experiencing isn't necessarily what others are. So spend a little time thinking about it from the other perspective and ask yourself, well, what could it be? What might it be? I call this plausible cause analysis or even to this point of like, well, what am I worried about happening if I share this industry disruptive idea? Am I worried they're going to take it? Am I worried they're going to laugh? What is it that I'm worried about? And is that thing, if that is, even if that worst thing happens, what happens next? It might not be as bad as you think, as we have it in our head.

I always tell people thoughts are fuzzy words bring clarity. So whatever we've gotten our head, if we can just tell somebody, tell our dog, write it down, like get it into words, then say, well, that's not near as big of a deal as I thought it.

Earlier when you were talking and then again in this response, that reaction of people not feeling like they're safe because they're talking to someone who rolls their eyes and all the rest of it, does it come back to, and we've talked about this ad infinitum over the years, communicating core values? Going back to having our strong roots, particularly I think we struggle, we seem to get questions about, communicating core values for an organization where it is a remote workforce. How do we communicate it first of all? How do we reinforce it when it's not the little plaque on the wall that they see every day when they walk in the door?

Well, that has nothing to do with it by the way. The plaque on the wall has nothing to do with it. Our values are our actions. So the way we communicate the values is make sure that our actions are in alignment with those things that we profess to be our values. Because people are watching our feet, not our lips, even remotely. Like when we respond to emails, how we respond to emails? It isn't just whether they see us walking up and down the hallway in the office. People watch our feet, our actions, more than our lips, our words.

Ultimately to me, you know, you could say, well, this is a safe environment, but if people don't feel it, then it isn't safe, right? Now, their perception might not be reality, I understand that. But that becomes the place that we have to try to work through together, right?

If that's true, if that's how people are feeling, if they feel like it's not a safe environment,

they're working remotely, do you bring them in to address that so that they're all in the same room, on the same level, so that they can get the physical reactions as well as the words?

So let's say it this way, it all depends. It depends on lots of things, including like where, how far people are away from each other. Like, and at this point, are we talking about, we're fundamentally talking about a level of coaching? Are we talking about this in terms of, I need to coach you about your behavior because it's not matching the values, then the question is, can we coach at a distance? Of course we can. Right, I definitely think we want our cameras on, if it all possible, because the richer the communication that we can have, the better chance we can have of it being successful and cameras on is the next best thing to being face to face, right? It's not the same, but it's the next best thing.

And so, you know, if it's around coaching, I mean, I would say this, if timing and logistics allow for people to come in, then that probably makes some sense. But here's the other side to that. I'll use a slightly different example. I had a team member for several years, she's retired about a year ago, and we were using webcams like, again, way before the pandemic, right? She didn't like using webcams and she was in a situation where she didn't always have really good bandwidth. So there was valid reasons for the video issue and there was some personal reasons for the video issue. I granted her some grace around that and sometimes she and I would just have a phone call rather than getting on camera, right? But she knew that sometimes I wanted us to be on camera, right? I wasn't going to, I decided that I wasn't going to mandate that she need to be on all the time, because there was also this bandwidth issue, some of the time. So I said, we will be on camera some of the time and not all the time.

Here's the place to be careful. I couldn't make the time we were going to be on camera only be the time when I had something that was going to be harder or challenging to say, because then the camera was like a trigger. So I didn't want that. So sometimes I'd say, hey, we haven't been on camera for a while, let's just be on camera and it would be a lovely, wonderful conversation. There's no conflict. There's no emotion. There's no code. There's no negative coaching, like none of that stuff, right? But if I really needed the camera on, I would make sure that that was there, but I didn't want her to feel like it was only then. So can we, should we bring people in? Yeah, maybe, but maybe we can't because they're halfway around the world. Then we've definitely got to make the communication as rich as we can. And the richest we can have is face to face across the table. Face to face, nose to nose, toes to toes, if you will. But the next best thing is what we're doing right now, which is on camera.

We'll take a break in our conversation with Kevin Eikenberry. Join us for Part 3, the final part of this conversation, for now I'm Kim Baillie, she's for Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.