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So, what you say and how you behave is important. This is why I believe people who have. Uh, leadership roles. Many of them are leaders and some of them are not, they hold the title, but there's a difference between having a title and being a leader.

CHRIS: Welcome to *No Turning Back*, a podcast hosted by General Stan McChrystal and myself, Chris Fussell. Our goal here is simple: to have serious conversations with serious leaders so that we can learn from the best and navigate these complex times together. Thanks for joining us.

ANNA: Every Monday for the last 21 years, Michael Dowling meets his 150 new employees. He relishes the opportunity to personally welcome the physicians, nurses, administrators, technicians, to the team, to share which behaviors are expected, to encourage them to innovate.

Michael is the President and CEO of Northwell Health, the biggest healthcare provider in the State of New York. Their hospitals, like many around the country, battled against COVID-19, and are now responding to the variants spreading rapidly across the country. Michael was in the trenches with his employees, and in today's episode, shares critical insight and perspective with Stan and Chris on how the team was prepared to respond to the threat of COVID-19.

Michael has fascinating leadership observations from COVID-19 that translate well to every challenge. In the conversation, he shares his own personal story of resilience, he differentiates having a title from being a leader, and explains why rule-breaking is critical to innovation. Michael also tells us why hurling, an (often violent) Gaelic Irish sport, has affected his own leadership.

Seldom do Stan and Chris speak to a leader with a challenge like the one Michael Dowling faced leading the massive healthcare system during the pandemic. The conversation provides wisdom, offers humor, and a refreshing honesty and perspective that gives us much to think about as the pandemic continues.

We hope you enjoy it. Thanks to Michael and his team for making the time.

Now, over to Stan.

STAN: Well, Michael, let me start by thanking you for joining us today. It really means a lot and I'm not going to be quite as clearheaded as I might normally be, because I stayed up late reading a great about a thatch roof falling in on a family. I really did. I, I finished every word because I was fascinated by it. And we're going to talk a little bit about it.

MICHAEL: You gotta find, you gotta find better things to read.

STAN: No, I don't. But, but I'm not gonna let you off the hook from telling us stories from that, but I want to start first with something that is really important to people. For the last 18 months, we've all faced this common enemy of COVID-19 and Chris and I have about 75 people in our company. So, when the COVID pandemic struck, we had 75 people that we immediately had to think about and then extended to their families. And we didn't know exactly how it would play out. Your scale of challenge was slightly different.

You had 76,000 direct employees, 830 hospitals, 3,800 physicians and countless people who depend upon what you and your team provide. And in a moment of uncertainty, I'm going to ask you to describe it, sort of tell us the story from when COVID first became evident. And then how did you respond as a leader?

MICHAEL: Well, there's a little bit of historical context, which is important here because we actually started to put together an emergency management preparation disaster preparation system prior to 9/11, because I've always assumed, that given our location in New York City, being close to three airports, that it was inevitable at some point that you would have a problem in the US.

And that probably comes from my background in Ireland, given all of the troubles and obviously being, you know, trying to stay up to date on what's happening around the, around the world. So, we started to put together the basic infrastructure 20 years ago, and we upgraded it from there.... you know, when we had H1N1, when we had SARS, when we had Hurricane Sandy, we had Hurricane Irene, we updated that infrastructure and we practice and do tabletop exercises all the time.

Always assuming that however comfortable we are, we've gotta be prepared for that, which is very unconfirmed, and that bad things will at some points occur. So back in January, when we were paying a lot of attention to what was going on in Italy and what was going on in Washington, and we were pretty certain that it would hit New York.

So, our first meeting where we got our key people together was in the mid-January. We didn't have our first case until March. So, we spent two years preparing mentally, attitudinally, with what we would do when it's going to happen. So, it didn't come as a big surprise. And it happens slowly in March, and it ratcheted up towards the end of March. And then it really hit us hard. The first week in April, we went from about 90 COVID patients in our hospitals on March 17th to 3,500 each day in our hospitals on April 6th. So, but it wasn't a massive surprise. And when you have the right people in the right place, when you have the right team working together and you're, you have done the preparatory work in advance, and we have a lot of other capabilities here.

This is what we're here for. You're here to deal with crisis. When you're in healthcare, we deal with them all the time. Small ones, big ones. This obviously was bigger than most, but it was not a total shock. And I think you will agree with this when you have the right people in the right places that you have confidence in, you can delegate, then big problems become small. And we

communicate on a continuous basis with everybody. So, communication was, was very, very, very important.

And I was on, I was out on the floors of the facilities beginning from day one. I was out every day, walking the floors, talking to frontline staff, making sure that they understand or understood that management was with them, that we will not sitting way in the background. And they were all by themselves that we were there with them.

And that made a huge, huge difference. So, um, yeah, it was frustrating at the beginning for the following reason... we had the virus, but we didn't know exactly what it was. We didn't know the effect of it. We didn't know how people got sick. We didn't know it affected the brain, but over the first, after the first couple of weeks, we were learning all the time. And sharing information about what we were learning. And to me, it's what you do when you're in a circumstance like this. This is what... if you're a leader in an organization, you got to stay calm, stay in control, don't get panic, don't panic, you know, take a step at a time and have your team prepared.

STAN: That's extraordinary. Let me describe Chris grew up as a SEAL and spent many, many years in SEAL team six and the one axiom which always proves itself again as every firefight is not like you plan it. You, you have an idea, you rehearse in many cases, and then it's a bit different. And for the leader, that's challenging for the people down in the trenches, on the edge of the organization, that can be even more frightening.

You talked about and you are well-known for having spent so much time out there. How did you communicate with your team? What techniques did you use and what did you communicate particularly during that period, when you didn't have the answers?

MICHAEL: we were communicating with frontline employees multiple times a day. So, you use technology to communicate. You would send out email messages, text messages. Every time we learn something new, we had a clinical team to come up with a new protocol and, and we would send that new protocol out. We had staff walking the floor. So, as I said, I was out down myself because face-to-face communication in a situation like this is very, very important.

The other thing that was absolutely key here is, was the safety of employees. And we were lucky because of all the infrastructure that we have, that we had plenty of PPE. We never ran out of masks. I was able to tell staff from day one, we have all the masks, gowns, gloves that you will ever need. You don't have to worry about your safety.

And, you know, healthcare employees are, you know, since they deal with crisis on an ongoing basis, the safety issue is important. They know they have to be flexible and adaptable, but as long as they have the equipment to protect themselves, they were comfortable. And we were able to communicate that now not every organization could do this because not every organization had to have the supplies that we had. We have our own supply chain company. We have our own lab, we have our own transport system, et cetera.

But I think what gives people anxiety... it's like, if you're sitting, you know, in a runway ready to take off on a plane and you're sitting there for two hours and nobody tells you what's going on, you get frustrated. But if the pilot comes on every 20 minutes and says, let me give you an update. You're calm. You'll understand that the time goes a little faster, you understand that you're being communicated with. So, we overdo the communication. So it was by phone. It was by text. It was by email. It was in person.

And it was all about assuring employees that we're with you. We are sharing everything with you. We're very transparent, and we will protect you. Once you do that consistently, it can be a project. You do it one week and you don't do it the other week. You've got to do it all the time. And when you do you provide that sense of safety and security, and by the way, it was interesting... our employee engagement scores jumped to the highest in history during the COVID year, our employee engagement went to the 92nd percentile in the, when the highest in the United States. One of the highest during COVID. And the other thing we did was when it slowed down a little bit in May, end of May, June, I provided \$2,500 to every single employee, plus seven days paid time off that they can take any time during their tenure while they work here.

And even though we were losing an awful lot of money, I made the decision to invest in those who went into the trench. And did unbelievable work. That meant an awful lot. And, I still have employees when I walk out there these days, I still have employees saying to me, we were so delighted to see you in person walking the COVID floors during the crisis.

And you understand that, you know, you've been in your circumstances and you know that you gotta be out there with the troops. So, we were very fortunate and, because we are born with a very large place, but we are all interconnected and we all know each other and it's a real team.

CHRIS: Michael, that's a really powerful testament and a summary. When you talk about in the, for years, you've been doing tabletops, war gaming, which we're huge believers in. But a lot of leaders listening to that, that might say, "okay, that's great, but what do you, what are you actually getting out of that?" So you'd laid out some, some, sort of tactical things that I'm assuming evolving all from years of war gaming, we need to have maybe PPE on standby, we need to have redundant communications plans that we can leverage... so that's one thing you get out of those. You get this practical... you know, ideas are going to be on the shelf in a time of crisis, but can you talk about the mentality that also comes out of that being consistently in the way you run an organization?

I'm assuming there's inside the culture is we know we're ready for crisis because we talk about being prepared all the time.

MICHAEL: It's it's, it's creating a culture of always being on alert and not being surprised. Like this past week we did an exercise at one of our hospitals where we sent ambulances to the hospitals and showed up with telling the hospital that we had a massive chemical spill and that we had very injured patients in the ambulances that just showed up at one of our places.

The hospital didn't know, the staff didn't know, the doctors didn't know, and we wanted to know how to respond. That responded perfectly. There was no panic. They know what to do. They know what the put in place, what, what levers to move, they know what supplies to get. And of course, it wasn't real, but they did not know that when it happened and we do these things on an ongoing basis.

So it's creating that, you know, we, we, as one of our, my staff says it's being comfortable with the uncomfortable, being on alert, understanding that bad things happen. But remember, of you're working in an emergency room in a hospital, you have to act like this all the time. Anyway, because of trauma case can show up in a moment's notice: a stabbing, a shooting, a bad car accident, and then it can be very, very calm for a couple of hours.

And all of a sudden on a Saturday night, all hell breaks loose again. So, you've always got to be alert like this, and that's part of our culture is never to be satisfied. Never to be comfortable, too comfortable, always be reaching higher than you think you can go and, and, and have resilience and be a very agile and adaptable. And by the way to stay calm. I get very common a crisis, personally, when everybody goes crazy around me, I get very, very calm for some reason. I don't always, typically being Irish. People wouldn't think that that's what you do to get calm, because I wish people tend to get a little bit crazy, but I get very calm, and you try to create that culture. Slow down, take it easy. We'll deal with this, this crisis, however bad it is, is not going to be. We are going to win. This is a war.

And when I was doing a lot of television back during the height of the COVID, which was on an ongoing basis, I always tried to promote this sense of optimism. We will win. There will only be one winner, and this is not going to be the virus. Tomorrow is going to be better. Yesterday was bad, but yesterday's history. We will deal with it again. Tomorrow we will do better. And this constant sense of optimism and positivity is unbelievably in my view, very, very important.

STAN: Michael, you didn't take the most traveled route to get to where you are now. You grew up in Knockaderry, Ireland, in a small village, in a hut with a thatched roof. And as you described rats live in the thatch roof. I didn't know that. And of course, eventually the, the roof caves in, but you also played hurling, which I describe as a psychotic form of lacrosse. It's really people out there with sticks, trying to do each other harm. And there are, there is a point system, but it's sort of irrelevant.

That may be an unfair characterization, but it certainly doesn't understate that the nature of that sport. So, you had a very different background. Tell me what about that background affected you, what did it shape in you? And then I've got to follow up on a couple of the people that shaped you.

MICHAEL: Well, first of all, I'm a first-generation immigrant. And, I'm a very strong, you know, advocate for immigration immigrants because, you know, we were built on the backs of immigrants, all of us, we're all immigrants. Some of us came here. Some of us came recently, others came many years ago. And I think that is that, that creativity, that risk-taking, that is very, you know, representative of the immigrant experience.

And poverty, by the way, is a wonderful motivator. You know, I always knew as a kid that I was going to get out and make something better for myself and that are obstacles along the way, at Johnny has a lot of obstacles. But as somebody said that if you don't have obstacles, you're probably not going any place. And it helps you build resilience and a little bit of toughness. And, my mother was a huge influence on me because she was one that always was positive, upbeat, and she used to always say something like this, and I'm paraphrasing, she would say don't ever "let your current circumstance inhibit your future potential."

So, where are you off today is no predictor of where you can be tomorrow. And I communicate that with staff all the time, where you are today, doesn't determine where you can be a year from now. It's up to you. Take responsibility, work hard, you know, be, be, be tenacious. If you'll fail, fine, get yourself, pick yourself up and move on. Don't you know, don't live in yesterday, you know, live in the tomorrow. And, so I think my background helped I left home when I was 16 and, you know, but it's no different than what so many people have done and what many people are doing today. And I think that that, that resilience is so, so important.

And the games, the hurling game, you know, I was actually, I was not bad looking before I started playing hurling. You know, my face has been hit many, many times. It's a phenomenal game. It has changed a little bit. It's got a little bit soft. It's not the same as when I played I'm a little bit old fashioned. I liked it. The old way we didn't wear any protection. There was no helmet, et cetera, but it's the fastest field sport in the world. It's 3000 years old. Yeah, I can hit you any place wherever the ball is, I can hit it if you... your job is to get your face out of the way and do it quickly.

And so that also, you know, that also toughens you up a little bit, but the other thing about sports, it, it, it, it proves the importance of teams. And I use sports analogies all the time with staff. You are a team. We work together, we support one another. You have different capabilities, different attributes, different skills. Its how you meld them all together that makes the difference. If you get a team of all stars, you'll probably will never win a championship. You've got to get the grinders and the smart guys and the fast guys and, you know, et cetera.

And that, and that to me is, you know, I look at my management team not as a team we have together and we win. And we're good in the locker room. And all we have just as good before the crisis as we are during the crisis, because if you're not good before the crisis it's very hard to be good during a crisis, you'll build your culture.

Pre-crisis just like before you go into a championship game games in my view, games are won in the locker room. It's the attitude in the locker room, the culture, the feeling of teamwork, the sense of community, all of that is what benefits you, when you go back out into the field and you meet the opposition.

STAN: Wow. When I was 16, my father had come back from his second tour in Vietnam about a year earlier, and my mother suddenly died. And my father was a relatively young, Brigadier General, had six children, and suddenly my mother in very short period became sick and passed.

And I realized suddenly she was the glue that held my family together. She was the person who was the light, the magnet, whatever description I want to use.

When in your book, you describe your mother, Mam, just in an extraordinary way. I want to pull just a little bit more about how she shaped you.

MICHAEL: She was a wonderful person, who believed in the goodness of humanity. Had of a difficult life, but did not dwell on that. Always believed that was something better. She had a love of learning as she was not, didn't have a lot of formal education, but she was very, well-read always had books of it. So, that optimism, I think that I constantly have comes from her, my love of education, of learning.

You're, you know, life's a journey of learning and I get that from her. I remember reading Churchill, reading Shakespeare as a kid in that house, with no running water, no heat, no bathrooms. I read Churchill's speeches. Zane Grey, by the way, who was an American writer, he wrote about the western part of the United States. And I remember reading his books. I've got all his books by the way. And he was able to describe the United States so that I could actually visually imagined United States. Imagine the Grand Tetons, imagine Wyoming and, so all of that to me, created this unbelievable love of education and the need to go to college.

I dreamed of going to college. My mother encouraged it. My father, on the other hand, didn't understand. He was much more of a hard-nosed individual, you know, you know, get out there and work, which I did from a very young age anyway. But my mother was the, she was the encouragement and always said to me, "people are good." Behind... people who are even bad for a moment that is goodness there, and you do everything you possibly can to help people. And don't play a victim, don't sit around saying, "Oh, look, what's the matter with me. Look how bad my situation is.

And I, to this day, I despise that. I don't like that. You're responsible for what you do. Even in the healthcare field, you know, you know, 40% of people's ill health is due to what they do to themselves. Not taking individual responsibility for their health. So, while we were in a big healthcare system and we take care of illness, you know, but if people want to be really healthy, then you got buckle up and do it lot of it yourself and all those genetic issues and biological issues. I understand that. But all of that comes from my mother. And she was very family-oriented and she was very religious. She went to church all the time, but never forced religion on us. Her religion was being good to people. It wasn't organized religion as such of course, in Ireland, she went to Catholic Church because quite frankly, there wasn't much of a choice where I grew up.

It was your Catholic or your nothing. So you went, I was an altar boy, if you can believe that I was a good altar by it. I was holy. I was very good. And of course being an Irish kid in a poor family, everybody expected you to become a priest. You know, there was a lot of, you know, pressure to go into the priesthood. I would have made a very bad priest. I can tell you that I would not have been a good priest. But now my mother kept the family together.

And even the fact that she had a tough life with my father, and even after he died, she would never say anything bad about him. She would say he was a good man. You know, he tried, he did his best. She would never go there. She was, you know, if you could, if you could live up to, you know, 10% for goodness, if you could live up to that level, you'd be doing great. She was very special.

STAN: I suspect with your mother's influence, had you gone into the church, you'd be Pope by now.

MICHAEL: Well, she would have said, why Pope and you can do that, don't ever let your circumstance as a priest, stop your potential to become Pope. That would be her attitude.

STAN: I think the great takeaway for this for me was of course, she reminded me so much of my mother who shared Greek and Roman mythology with me and talked about bigger things is the effect that one person can have on another. Not in an ostentatious way, but in a quiet way and exhibiting certain attitudes and behaviors. And of course, then when we look in the mirror, what's our responsibility to our family and the people that we care about to try to be Mam to someone else.

MICHAEL: Oh, absolutely. I mean, uh, you know, what's your legacy at the end of the day. So, you know what you do to help other people, how you influence other people. We're all mentors, especially when you're in a leadership position, because whether, you know, people listen, they're influenced by what we say. They're influenced by our behavior. You know, you, you stand up at a meeting and I've seen you and I've been with you. And I see how people look at you and how they respect you and how they listened to every word. So, what you say and how you behave is important.

This is why I believe people who have leadership roles, the many of them are leaders, and some of them are not, they hold the title, but there's a difference between having a title and being a leader. You create the future, you inspire people and you inspire people around you. Not by lighting a fire under them, but lighting a fire in them. And, so we, we bear those of us who run organizations and I've had roles of responsibility have a major obligation, to do the right thing all the time. And be consistent in doing the right thing and, not just doing it one year and the next year falling off. It's what you do over time that matters, and you can look in the mirror and say, what did I do? And all people don't remember the title you had, they'll remember what you did with it. And I think that we got to keep that in mind all the time.

And one last point is having a high degree of humility is strength. You don't want to be walking on, take a look at me. Look how important I am. Especially I'm the CEO, look at the big office. I got my wonderful desk, my great furniture. Who cares. You gotta be humble, you know, there's strength and humility. Be a regular person with a special responsibility.

CHRIS: Michael, can I, try to throw together a few, few ideas that you've shared, and maybe go back to the initial discussion around the last year and a half the COVID crisis. You gave a great sense that, that, you know, 80,000 person enterprise level, how you prepared for it, how you'd

lead through it, and how your team reacted. But I know you think at the next level up and a little beyond that, from a leadership perspective and that, that idea of that consistency and approach and, and constantly learning what systems level lessons do you think, or hope, we've learned out of the last year when it comes to healthcare at the national level?

MICHAEL: Well, broad lessons. One is that, let me just kind of deviate just for a second to come back. We learned the importance of unity, during COVID, those of us working on it every day, which is something I would hope that United States would understand that we got to come together and unify around some important purposes and mission.

We got to depend upon science and information and facts rather than illusion. We got to bring a sense of decency to public discourse on the healthcare space. We the toxicity of our politics these days is such a frustration that was evident during COVID. And if we are to change healthcare and healthcare reform and make it better, we've got to come together and unify that this is what we want to do and not be being, being so toxic in our discussions and, and compromise is not a bad word.

Compromise is positive. You're not going to get any healthcare reform done nationally unless people are willing to compromise. You have opposing views, different views. You got to come together and find that wonderful, beautiful middle. If we can come to those, if we can understand those concepts, you're never going to get agreement.

We got another lesson with COVID. We've got to be an awful lot better prepared healthcare wise for future disasters. I mean, the virus to me is a national security issue and it's a global issue. We can handle things like this just nationally. I mean, I would, and it's beginning to happen a little bit now, but I've talked about this in the past. We've got to get together together with the other countries to help anticipate these do a lot of predictive analysis. So, we know when these things are going to occur. And then from a global perspective with the larger countries, whether it's China, the European Union and us come together about how to react to it.

So there's multiple lessons here, from both the science side of it, the global side, and tell them some international virus crisis, which we will have again, and the domestic issue about healthcare reform. But healthcare reform means changing what hospitals and doctors and nurses do. It means changing what we as individuals do. It means dealing with all the social determinants issues, the poverty issues, the lack of food security, food insecurity issues, housing issues, et cetera. It's a combination. And one last point here, I was just a small reading, something about, and I, you know, you know, companies like Coca Cola that sell Coke and kids drink it.

You have sugar in Coke. What's the responsibility of a company like Coca Cola to deal with the potential negative health effects on kids of drinking Coke? Those kids... obesity grows. Then they come to the hospital to us and we don't fix them right away. And we get blamed for why we have obesity. We didn't create obesity. We have a universal responsibility. It's not... healthcare is what we all do. It's not just what hospital and doctors do because we primarily focus on illness treatment. We've got to have it be a catalyst to broaden the description of what health is. Health

is more than the absence of illness. And until we can get our arms around those kinds of ideas, you're not going to reform healthcare back much because it's more than just what we do, et cetera.

And I don't know if I', make myself clear here, but it's a much larger, larger, holistic issue that we got to get our heads wrapped around.

STAN: It's as though we rehearsed it, Michael, because that is a perfect step into where I wanted to go and really talk about strategic leadership. I've been around you, I've gotten to know you. I would argue you're not a healthcare leader. You're just a leader. In fact, you have taken a role in working for veterans. You've taken a role on gun violence. You've taken a role on inequality, writ large, in our society and opportunity. And those are outside of the narrow lane that some leaders in any industry might constrain themselves to because they don't want to get their head above the parapet and have somebody take a shot at them.

I like to pull this just a little further, because... what is the responsibility for leaders who have a world stage? Have a level of influence to get outside their lane and maybe opine on things that are not directly under their purview.

MICHAEL: Oh, I think they have a huge responsibility. And, and to me, if you're a, if you're running a large organization and you have a leadership role, you have an inside job and an outside job.

Your inside job, you know, do the best you can possibly do with your company. Manage your company the best way you possibly can be innovative, be creative, be it adaptive, et cetera, et cetera. But you'll have an external role because of the nature of who you are and what you say and the position you hold you'll have influence. So, the question then becomes, how do you use the influence outside your organization?

And that to me is the concept of leadership. I mean, I, you know, yeah, I'm very involved in the gun violence issue. I think it's a public health issue, But, environmental health, which I will be delving into a lot more, you know, is also relating to health because there's hardly anything that is not health, right?

So, the same with veterans, you know, what is our responsibility to those people that keep us safe that have given so much to give us the freedoms that we currently enjoy? What is our responsibility as leaders in our respective professions, in that, with that, in that regard? I think that if you just stay inside your lane, um, you're only doing part of your job.

You gotta go outside your lane. And when I'm asked about why am I going outside my lane? I say, I consider it my lane. You know, I'm not, I don't, you know, I'm not putting the walls around what I do. It's, it's the broader thing. You, you, you, we, we have, we go through life, we're going to realize a journey. We, we either exist or we try to make a difference and you'll make a difference in a little way or in a big way. And you can definitely do both.

So, I think, you know, the best definition of leadership that I ever came across is the following: that leadership is about, and you'll probably have heard this... Leadership is about managing the present, selectively forgetting the past, and creating the future. Our job while we're here is to create a better future sort of those people who come behind us, including our kids live in a better place.

That's the legacy. That to me is leaders do whether you enter the political arena, in the military arena or in the arena I'm in. And that's why you're out there now. And I, you know, you're an inspiration from, you know, and I've been fortunate to get to know you some, and hopefully we'll do more of this, but you're an inspiration out there taking a positions on lots of issues and influencing other people to think beyond your own narrow perspective.

And by the way COVID has changed us all. We have different today because of COVID. And I think that COVID was a good thing to have happened despite us maybe difficult thing to say, but let's explain it. It was a terrible thing, but in many ways, it gave us a kick in the butt to remind us about what's important.

What's important personally, what's important organizationally, and what our role in the world. We are all so interdependent as COVID proved, we are not... we are very fragile as COVID proved, but not as strong as sometimes we think we are. And, but that leadership is raising the bar. It's constantly raising the bar and not being comfortable with where you are.

And, you know, success comes by being a little bit uncomfortable. Which means that you're always trying to get better. It's like if you play sports and sports is a wonderful thing to be involved in, if you're a good athlete, you're never satisfied with how good you are, because you're always trying to be better next year, because you might win the championship today.

But if you don't keep getting better, you're going to lose it. And so that kind of an attitude is what, the attitude that I kind of carry along with me all the time. And, and, you know, I've been very, very fortunate. I'm, I'm one of the luckiest guys in the world and I grew up without a lot of material wellbeing.

We didn't have much as kids, but I have... I, you know, I had a mentor in my mother who gave me more than I could ever imagine. It was a lot more important to me than having money in our pocket or messes only having heat in the house sometimes. Sometimes she gave, she gave us more, something is more important like your mother did to you. And I believe is most mothers do to most kids. They, you know, they'll be influencers. They are the mentors. They're the people that I think that we also to dedicated to.

CHRIS: Michael, just one quick follow up question for me and I'll turn it over to Stan. But, have you... I've observed leaders like, like yourself, like Stan McChrystal in the military, when I was working with forum there other spaces, leaders that are at that very strategic systems-level leadership, where there is no rule book, there's no one telling you what to do. You have to figure out these problems as they come at you. And some leaders have... are naturally more comfortable there.

Have you always felt like that type of leader or is that something you grew into over the years? And do you look for that in other leaders too? Is there, are there indicators or you say this is a, this is a person that is meant to lead at the systems level, so we're going to grow him or her up to get there?

MICHAEL: Yeah, I've always been, I think, a little like this. I mean, when I went to college, I was very involved in regionals things. I was involved in setting up agencies to help poor kids in the community that had hardly anything to do with what I was doing in school at the time. I've always felt this obligation that you got to make a difference if you have any talent and now, we have all got different talents, then you should be making a difference as broadly as you possibly can.

So I've always been like this. You know, like, you know, the world is a big canvas, you know, you know what you do with it. And if you have the opportunity, then you should do something with it. So, and I've always felt like that. And, and I I've read, you know, I, you know, I always been fascinated with Gandhi, with Mandela. You know, with Churchill, you know, with, FDR, and when you look back at, you know, who has made differences in the world, you, you come to categories of people like this. If you don't, if you don't take risk, if you don't break a rule, you're not, you're not moving forward.

The problem today for a healthcare and for many organizations, we live in a world that is saturated with compliance and regulation, and then they want you to be entrepreneurial, but compliance and regulation is the antithesis of innovation. It's the opposite. If you're going to be innovative, you've got to break a rule. The trouble with government is there's... if you break a rule they slap you on the wrist. They should give you a credit for breaking a rule because most of them are stupid anyway. Or they may have been very smart five years ago, but they're terribly stupid today. And by the way, COVID is another example here. The way, the reason we were able to handle COVID is we broke every rule in the book. The governor, and I worked with him very closely on this, as you know, he dispensed with most regulations. That was the only reason that we could innovate. And out of putting some of those rules back in place.

So, now you'll have bureaucracy getting in the way again. So you gotta be, you gotta be written, you gotta be able to take risks, not be risk averse. And, you know, be willing, and I say this often to my board, I'm willing to ask for forgiveness much more so than ask for permission. And you need people like this. And, uh, and fortunately, we've got a lot of people who do this kind of stuff, which is what we should be continuing to promote. And I know you guys do that and your work, and I've read your materials.

And, I've read the *Team of Teams* and all which is the, you know, your broke rules. You know, you did something new, it was different. Well, that's what's exciting. That's what turns you on, is the break a rule. Look, I say it by staff all the time. If you're not getting somebody upsets during the day, during the week, you're not doing anything.

STAN: I love that. And it reminds me of what I was taught as a Lieutenant. If it's stupid and it works, it ain't stupid.

MICHAEL: Right.

STAN: I'm now going to break the rules by adding another question. And I'm just going to ask you to describe Michael Dowling, a perfect day. From the moment you wake up, tell me the things you do. If when you went to bed that night, you say that was perfect.

MICHAEL: A perfect day. A perfect day to me is when it is not calm. When it is a little bit turbulent. When there is a crisis of some kind, when there is difficult decisions to be made, when you're, when you're disrupting something. And when I spend time with frontline staff, those are my best days when I'm walking the floors, talking to staff, talking to the security guards, being in the laundry room, being in the kitchen with the staff, being with the nurses, listening to them and learning from them.

This is all an education is they're teaching me. That to me is a good day, when I go home excited about the possibility of tomorrow. And knowing that tomorrow we can really just move the agenda forward. You know, you don't want to exist. You want to be doing something positive. So, you know, I'm an early riser.

I'm up every morning at around 4:15, 4:30. I'm on the road at 5:30. I have meetings with physicians and others every morning, around 6:30/7 on Monday, is a good day for me because I meet all new employees that are hired every new employee. We had about 150 to 160 people a week.

This week, we're high of 178 people. I meet them all every Monday. I've been doing it for 21 years. I enjoy that because I know who's coming into the team. They know who I am. They know what the system is about, what's acceptable, what's not acceptable, what our mission is. And I'm very clear about a certain behaviors that won't be tolerated. You're a team player. You're here to do good work. You're here to raise the bar. You're here to promote yourself, to be innovative. And so, those are good days. And I, if I came in and everything was nice and calm and everything was wonderful and everything is going great.

That's when I get worried, by the way, when everything is nice and calm because I know it's not true, you know. If there isn't a little bit of disconnect someplace, then there's something wrong. So, I get excited by that.

It's like when I played sports, the games I loved were the games that we just barely won, where all that it came down to the last three minutes and we won. If it was a nice coast and we could win easily, it didn't challenge, you know, that was easy. What the hell? You didn't have to... you didn't break a sweat. You got to break a sweat every day.

STAN: Well, a perfect day for me is when I get to listen to a leader like you.

MICHAEL: Well, you're too kind.

CHRIS: Michael, really a great discussion, a great note to finish on. As a footnote for any of your employees here in the, in the US that aren't familiar with hurling, maybe first time, they've heard that you have a background in the sport. Stan described it as psychotic lacrosse. I would say it's more like rugby with baseball bats. If you want to understand your CEO, you go watch a hurling match.

That's a good one. You know, it's, it's a little, it's a little different today. They've, they've put a lot of new rules in place you can't get away with today. What I got away with in the old days. They wear helmets today. We never wore helmets.

CHRIS: It's amazing that any of you survived.

MICHAEL: I'm not a fan of helmets because it gives you this false sense of security. And, it reduces that swiftness, you need to get your face out of the way. Now I can tell you, I used to, I didn't get my face out of the way all the time, fast enough. Uh, but most of the time I did, but ever so often, I'm, it's not bad to get a crack across the head. It wakes you up.

STAN: My first platoon Sergeant, I was up in a paratroop unit, and one of the young paratroopers asked him about a scar on his head and the platoon Sergeant goes, "crevice - that's experience."

MICHAEL: I completely agree. I completely agree. And I lost my teeth in the game and, uh, you know, and the key is, is getting a hit like that and staying in the game. Yeah. You know, it's, you know, saying, okay, now that just, that just got me teed off a little bit. Now I'm here now, now we're going to win.

And now you guys have been in that situation. You know, you know, and all we come across there's a crisis. You have it, you can complain about it. You can whine about it. You can blame somebody else for it. Or you can do something about it. And you do something about it. The, the guy hits you in the face, you do something about it.

CHRIS: Michael, I couldn't appreciate the, the discussion more. And thanks for taking the time Stan over to you.

STAN: No, that's all. I'd say, Michael, thanks for this today. Thanks for your wisdom. Thanks for your friendship.

Well, well thank you. And you guys are inspiration. I love what you do. Thank you. Keep it up and let's stay in touch. Okay. Thank you for this opportunity. I really appreciate it. And by the way, tonight when you're reading a book, get it, get it, get a romantic book or something before bed. Not *Where the Roof Caves in*.

STAN: Perfect.

MICHAEL: Thank you guys.

CHRIS: You know, I didn't know about his athletic background, but when you, you hear him, it's not surprising. He's just, uh, from his, you, you just finished his biography, just as a grinder, as a young person raised without any sort of advantages, and now is a real servant leader. So, curious your thoughts on that discussion. Anything that jumped out at you?

STAN: Yeah. I got to know Michael before I got to know his story. And so, I met him as the CEO of Northwell Health and he's incredibly impressive. If you watch him deal with his team, he has sort of a confident, but humble humanity in how he interacts. And yet they take on great big ideas.

So, I'm literally, I was floored when he gave me a copy of his book and I read it really in two days, because I was just absolutely riveted to it. And it's, I'd really been raised on the quiet man with Marino Hara and John Wayne about, you know, Ireland and this story isn't a long way from that. Here's a guy who grows up and Knockaderry, Ireland. Tiny little village. I mean, a hard scrapple upbringing if ever there was one, but what does he keep talking about? He talks about his mother, Mam, the strong personality. He talks about the different effects of the values that were built into the society he was a part of. And he describes them almost as advantages, not as impediments to his later success.

CHRIS: Yeah. Ot's a, it's a great point. And he doesn't, he didn't frame those as... he doesn't have a chip on his shoulder. He came through all that, and this is more of a servant leader as a result. You know, you had mentioned to me, and then we talked about it in the discussion, that every Monday he meets with all, all new employees, you know, a hundred plus people every week coming into the organization.

And you know, when you hear that, you think that's, of course that's like great, just great leadership, but so few leaders do it. Right. So why do you think leaders fall out of that habit? And you've led at the tens of thousands and beyond level? It's easy, I'm assuming to just say, well, somebody else can do it. It's not good use of my time. But when you hear Michael for so many years saying, "no, no, this has to be part of my operating rhythm," what, what comes to mind when you look at other leaders that sort of let things like that fall side?

STAN: I think you need to be reminded of what has an effect and what doesn't. I think back of the story of *Too Big to Fail* and Lehman brothers, and there was Dick Fuld and that the story is that he had a private elevator, so that when he arrived in the office in the morning would take him straight to his office and he didn't have to go through any of this team to get to his sanctuary where he worked.

And I'm sure he thought he was doing his job and he was doing his role, but sometimes leaders forget that their role is symbolic. It's inspirational. It in so many ways is more about how they are, and how they interact, than specific tasks that they do. And I think Michael has an intuitive sense, plus he's reminded, because I've gotten to know the people around him, that when he

meets every week with 150 employees, that story keeps going out around Northwell Health, 76,000 team members, and that tribal knowledge of what his role is and what he does becomes greater and greater all the time in the, in the telling the story became, becomes incredibly important.

The fact that during the pandemic, he was out around the hospitals all the time with the mask on, working with people and implicitly sharing the danger. And again, it builds up the idea.

CHRIS: Yeah. That when he talked about being on the front lines, I didn't know how he was going to describe it. And I was, I really appreciated the way he did, which was, sort of paraphrasing, but where else was I going to be? I mean, that was where, where I was going to get the best sense of what was going on. I was going to stand there with teammates. There's 50 reasons that you could justify not doing that. I should be at the, our, our satellite headquarters up in Connecticut where I can manage things and talk to DC, et cetera. I think really good... one of my mentors in the, in early in the SEAL teams, even just at the tactical level, taught me, you need to put yourself as close to where the critical action is that you can still make informed decisions. There's always going to be a temptation to either get too in the mix, and obviously Michael was not describing that, he wasn't trying to take over a doctor's role or too far removed where you think you can see everything, but you're actually just ineffective. And so, he certainly seems like a leader that has found that, that very fine balance between those, those, those two parts of the spectrum.

STAN: I also personally found it impressive that he's taken a little bit of personal risk. He has come out for controls to stop gun violence. He has been very public about helping veterans. That's not really controversial, but he has taken some tough stands as an individual and as a CEO of a big organization, as we know in today's world, the slings and arrows come after anyone who takes a stand and he doesn't describe it with any kind of great pride that he does that, he just sort of says, of course I do that. That's the right thing to do. And I think that's a, that's a really impressive trait.

CHRIS: Yeah. He's, he's, he's certainly a leader in full, you know, even, even describing healthcare in, in, in the US when he, again, paraphrasing basically, you know, healthcare is, it starts on day one and it's, it's a whole series of personal decisions is how we talk to as a society about food and exercise and rest, et cetera, that the hospital is only one part of that, that spectrum, which again, can be inside the healthcare system, sort of a controversial position, or it sounds like you're taking a political position where it's just, it's just in my view, just a leader speaking honestly, about our responsibilities to society, to care for ourselves and our families.

And then the system is there to support, not to be the one-stop shop, to make everything work when, when we ignored it ourselves.

STAN: You know, we don't have a checklist or template that I'm comfortable with that says how a leader ought to lead. You know, if you can read one article and a business magazine says that the person who masters every detail in their organization has the ability to control and guide things right way.

And in other cases, you have leaders who are more inspirational and above the day-to-day. And so, to me, there's not a perfect solution. It's very contextual, but there are some basic themes. And what comes out at me is Michael first and foremost really cares. He cares about what he does, and he cares about the team that he's a part of and the ecosystem in which they operate.

And to me, having known him for a while now, it comes across as extraordinarily genuine. And I think that's a multiplier right there.

CHRIS: Yeah, it is. And just a final comment, uh, where you know, we talked to organizations a lot about the range in which folks are empowered in an organization to make decisions, and that can cascade down and across. And it's a nice way to organize your thinking. And we also talked to them about the, to be on the lookout for those, what we would call positive deviance, those, those emerging high-performance leaders that want to sit right on the edge of that lane and challenge the system and that's where you find your best insights and you move forward as an organization.

Oftentimes, and I think he, he said something like, you know, if you're staying in your lane, you're, you're, you're not leading. Right. And so, I think a similar idea, like finding right on that edge. And they said, my, I think my lane is pretty wide. So, I would agree with you like a great example of a leader just knows intuitively, "Hey, there's a rule book, but you've got to move fast and aggressively. You got to find the edge of it and you've, you've got to innovate if you're gonna solve hard problems."

So, certainly a, a servant leader that we can all learn from very, very appreciative of he and his team for all the work they've done over the last 18 months on behalf of all of us and for taking the time this year to that.