

The emotional burden of leadership

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Erika:

All right, so excited to be here with you today. We've got Chris Hutchinson. I'm going to give him a few minutes to introduce himself, but very, very excited about the topic that we have today, the emotional burden of leadership. So I'm really excited. The prep itself was fun. And all the time I've been getting to know Chris here over the last couple of years, has been great. So glad that you can finally join the podcast, Chris. So I will pass it over to you for just a few minutes to introduce yourself.

Chris:

Erika, I'm very excited to be here too. This is great. We've gotten to spend some time together and I know that this podcast, and you, and the team are really focused on how do you help companies that are in high growth situations do really well. And this is a piece that frequently gets overlooked, so it's going to be fun to dig down into it gently.

I should say, pardon of my introduction. So I've been doing this with my company for 21 years. I'm one of these founders that has these problems so that I can look in the mirror and go, oh, there it is. Sometimes I get introduced as a recovering engineer and then the engineers in the room get really because they're like, "Wat is there to recover from?" But essentially it's around the people components are as important or more important than the technical expertise of the systems we build. And so what our company does really is help leaders and teams work together better so that we can go make organizations effective and efficient. We don't really come in and tell people what to do. We help unearth what's there so they can use all that strength to go make things happen.

Erika:

Awesome. Outstanding. Well, so we're going to dive in. And again, I like the way that you put this out there, Chris, how to successfully wrestle because I think what it is, with the emotional burden of leadership. So I'm going to let you speak to this first is the awareness So what does that look like?

Chris:

Well, I think recently I got a chance to take a four month sabbatical. And it was a really neat situation where it's long enough so people can't just tie a rope to the steering wheel and said he'll be back, as the founder. And when I did that, the folks that stepped in and sat down in the seat and did things later on said, "I had no idea that there was so much emotional work in leadership." And I said, "Oh, really?" And they're like, "Now I know why sometimes you'd be like, 'Oh, this is hard.' And we're like, 'No, it's easy. This is not a big problem.'"

So I think the awareness that it is an... Well, let me say it this way. Unless you're pathologically damaged, you probably care about people. And when you care about people, you get a sense of when things are going well or not. And that comes back to you in responsibilities as a leader. If you feel that you're like, "Holy cow, I have this responsibility for this organization, or these people, or this team, and we're not doing as good as we could. I think we could be better, but we're not. What's happening? What am I doing wrong?" So that awareness that it is emotional work, trying to wrestle with people's highs and lows, and especially now, there's a higher level of expectation. I've had people say, "I'm like a counselor." People come in and say, "I'm not working out with my spouse. What do I do?" And things that never used to come to work because work and life blended during Covid. So it's a higher burden I think.

Erika:

Yeah. And because we're focused on high growth companies, and I know the answer.. I think I know the answer, but I want to hear you say it. How does that show up in high growth companies?

Chris:

Well, in high growth companies, very frequently those are created around someone who had a great idea and that great idea is a product or a service. And it's not a great idea like, "Wow, I'm going to make this amazing company that's going to go deliver this stuff." They're like, "I'm going to go do this thing." And so it's very easy for that infrastructure work that really needs to happen to be completely discounted, like, "Just get these smart people in a room, get the best from the industry, put them all in a room together and then they'll perform like a clock."

That's usually the opposite of what happens. People probably have some egos, and we start being really siloed, and that's not going to help the organization. One thing that I like to share, this is from engineering, is if we optimize every piece of an organization, it means the organization will be suboptimized. We sell three times what we can produce. We have an inventory way more than we can ever distribute. It's just huge problems. But inventory is like, "This is what we're creating." And distribution's going, "We're doing all we can."

But if you optimize the organization, it almost automatically means everybody, except maybe one or two functions, is suboptimized. People who are running hard and high grow company don't want to hear that, like, "I want to be running at 150%. I don't care what you want, even though I'm generating waste and problems for other people." Oh by the way, the leader gets to see all this and figure out how do I tell people we need to actually run together, not just in the direction individually.

Erika:

I love that. Give me a for example. So maybe it's, "I worked with this." And I know you don't want to name names probably, but, "I worked with this company or this company," because I really loved how... Because it's almost like they were siloed and they were all trying to do the best that they could, but they didn't have the company objective in mind. So then they didn't get where they wanted to go. But give us a for example.

Chris:

Yeah, I can give you a high growth company. It's a startup. It's been a startup mode for a while. It's a technological company. I won't say where it is in and what it does. But they had some people they brought in to actually take technological ideas and put them into practice so they could actually produce this stuff. The people who are in the idea generation are like, it needs to be perfect where they get their value. It's like it needs to be better and better and better. And the people that are trying to create the factory to actually generate this stuff, it's like we got to stop at some point and actually make this stuff happen.

And they were in this incredible tension because it was like, no, no, but wait, we could get this one more thing done and then it'll be better. And so everybody's running optimally, but the company was literally almost bankrupt because they couldn't actually get the product out even. And so they had to do, like, "We have to have a freeze on this," which upset the people who are developing it off, but helped get runway for the folks who could actually get the product out so they could make money to then loop the cycle back.

Erika:

Yeah, to continue to continue to work on it. How long did that take to work through with the leadership team?

Chris:

Stuff like that? Well, it had been existing for a long time, but until they got to the point where they had the funding and they were high-growth, it didn't matter, they just could use the funding. So it developed over probably a decade I would say, that they were cranking along. And then in the last 9 to, it's usually nine to 18 months, about 9 months is about like, "Wait, we need to make a change." Until we can successfully make that change, is it takes 9 months when you have a hard habit.

Erika:

Yeah, no, that makes sense. Well, and probably even more important today for companies who likely are a little bit more focused on profitability. In terms of getting funded, it's a little bit slower than it was unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on how you look at it. So that focus on profitability, more important than ever to make sure that you get it right.

So I'm going to switch gears on us just a little bit and talk about the emotional burden in terms of the founder because I think hopefully we have some founders listening, and or I'm sure we have many that were former founders, et cetera. So I do think that's something that would be really interesting to touch on as well.

Chris:

Yeah, founder syndrome is a... You can Google that. When I bring up the symptoms to people, they're like, "Really, that's a thing?" I'm like, "Yeah, it's not just you." It's a system dynamic that occurs.

And so what happens is I start a company and I have a vision for what's possible. And I create a strategy around that, how we can get there. And then we create a structure of roles and things. When you start, it's all you, and then you got to give things away. And then that means you have roles.

And essentially you can't quite see, but my hands are horizontal here. They all have equal weight and importance. And after the role is the person, me. So anything that's criticized about any part of that is a personal attack. Because I was... "What do you mean? I developed that strategy. Excuse me, where were you," and da da da. Or, "This is my role, I do it well." And so it feels incredibly personal.

And what I do is when I do this, I write it down on dry erase board. And then I write it down vertically. On the top is the vision served by the strategy, served by the structure, served by the roles, served by the people. And so if anything changes above, everything below has an opportunity to change.

And it's not personal. But that's really hard. It's like an "identityectomy" for founders because the emotional burden is, "I'm carrying all that stuff. And it's all mine. And it feels like a part of me." And until you can step away from that and say, "I'm here and that's there so we can all get better," and put it on a, again, dry erase board where we're shoulder to shoulder looking at it, and go, what can be better? But so it's separating that personal... I mean taking it personally is what's got you here and it's exactly what will drag you down if you don't separate that and say, "That's over there. I'm over here, we're okay."

Erika:

That makes a lot of sense. And one thing, and we did not talk about this, full disclosure, did not talk about this in the prep, Chris, so I'm throwing a zinger at you.

Chris:

Oh my gosh.

Erika:

But I think a lot of high growth companies that have really, really strong cultures, especially when they're smaller and they're scrappy, that is one thing you see. Sometimes they'll hire for it. Now that gets a lot harder as they get bigger.

Chris:

Definitely.

Erika:

And again, this is the zinger I'm throwing at you, how does that play into this? So at some point the company gets to a point where they can't rely completely on their founder. They're getting too big, which is a great problem to have. That's what you want to do. We did hire for culture, but man, now, we thought we hired everyone for culture, but it's not working as well. Help me think through some of it. Because I think those are some of the problems that these companies face.

Chris:

Absolutely. There's no one magic bullet or thing to make that work. I'll tell you one way. And it's going to sound... People use this and it doesn't work well, so I'll qualify it. So because we'll talk about values. And values are frequently aspirational ideas of about who we should be. And in fact, it's who you're not being, and you better go do that or else. But When you actually... I talk about building an eggshell structure. It's just enough structure around what's there so it can evolve and grow.

So we actually have times when we sit down and say, "So what were the times we did something when it wasn't easy, when it was hard, when we bled, but we did it anyway?" And reverse engineer out what are those lived behaviors? I'll call them that way. And those are the things that we're like, "Well, we got on a plane even, and took something to a customer, and at nine o'clock on Thanksgiving to go do something." Well, it sounds like you have a pretty deep care of the customer. But we don't say, "You need to care for the customer and let's show it."

And you can reverse engineer out who are we? Because these are the things we'll do even when people would go, "That's stupid, what are you doing that for? Just take the easy route." That can help people have, and especially the story, that's how that perpetuates that culture you're trying to do. And you pick the ones that are great, not the ones where bad things happen. You pick those and you say, "This is who we are. And when we're talking to people, if they don't fit with this, let's get out."

Southwest has a great thing where they actually will take pilots to come in and have them go down and get shorts at the company store and then do their whole interview with the top suit and then shorts. And if they're unwilling to do that, I don't know if this still applies, they're out. They're out.

Erika:

Really?

Chris:

They're not a fit. Yeah.

Erika:

Super interesting.

Chris:

Yeah, so it's thinking about those things, not just to be hokey, to really think about what are the things that when push comes to shove, this person's going to be lined up with everybody else, versus saying, "Hey, not my problem. You guys look like you got a lot of trouble. I think I'm going off to another high growth company. See you."

Erika:

Yeah, I really like the story aspect because I think that that can resonate. And you'll remember that much better.

Chris:

That's the way we all remember things. I can recount speeches of people when they share something, and I almost don't remember their name, but I can remember the story that they have. That's what you want to latch onto and use to the benefit of everyone.

Erika:

So you would say that that should actually be part of developing your company values?

Chris:

Yeah, I would do that because most people do aspirational values. Let's be this, this, and this, instead of, "Who are we really?" It might be something you're working towards, but don't put it in there because people will go, "Well, that's not us. This whole thing is garbage."

Erika:

I like that.

Chris:

They'll throw it all out. Yeah.

Erika:

I love that. See, now I got off on a tangent here.

Chris:

No, it's totally good. This is such a rich place because it's untraveled. People that have gone through multiple failures, they get this. They say, "You know what, we're going to sit down. And every person we're going to see what do they bring both in superpower and kryptonite, and how are we offsetting that?" Not that everybody's perfect, but in a team we need each other. And we can go make great things happen much better than if we're all individually just, "I won. What's wrong with you? You're way behind us."

Erika:

Yeah, absolutely. So when do companies come to you versus when should they come to you?

Chris:

That's such a great question. Oh my god. Well, a lot of times we get seen as urgent care. And somebody will come in and say, "Okay, I have this person named Erika Whitmore and we need to fix her. And so what are you going to do to do that?"

Now luckily, actually most of our clients don't do that anymore, because I don't know, we just attract the right people who say, "Hey, we are having a challenge in our company and we really need to support stuff. And we have multiple people that are struggling. And so can we have a conversation around what's possible and how can we help?" Because there's all sorts of tools we have, but it depends on where we're going and what we're trying to do.

So I think a lot of folks come with, as we say, the presenting problems usually not the real problem. It's not probably you Erika. It's probably... And I'm making this up by the way, it's not you.

Erika:

Yeah, no, I am a problem. Everybody will tell you that.

Chris:

You might have a really good sense of harmony. And you are the first, the canary in the coal mine, that's starting to go, "Ooh, it's not feeling right for me." And other people are like, "Well, Erika's having a hard time," versus saying, "Erika is our warning system that we are starting to tread into the place where we're going to have stress fractures and it's going to pull the company... Oh, we're going to get an offer to be bought? Now it's all about each person rather than us together." So thinking about those things.

So I think times when people really should go see folks like us, and would be like, "We're really trying to get traction towards somewhere and it's just not happening. We aren't being the best of ourselves. People are starting to take care of themselves. And whatever's left over, maybe somebody gets it." So when a team is... And it's not all lovey dovey hugs. It means I'm willing to step in there and say, "Erika, you're having a hard time." Rather, my accountability to you is I need to take something out of your backpack because we're walking slower because you can't walk that fast. What can we do together? How can I help you? And those teams go a long way because everybody's making up for each other's limitations, not trying to just shine.

And the leader has to set the aspect I think of, "What are we doing here together?" Versus, if I endorse you and say, "Well Erika, you're having a hard time. Sorry about that. You're on a pip or something." And then this other person, "You're doing so great." I have just endorsed individualism and we don't have a team. And now everybody's like, "Ah, just take care of yourself." And that's the death of many companies because when you suboptimize to that function, the company's not going to succeed.

Erika:

That makes a lot of sense. How about bringing it back to relationships and trust? That was something that we touched on a little bit earlier, and just talk to me a little bit about that aspect Of leadership and the emotional burden of leadership.

Chris:

That's a perfect connection because to basically to take on that burden means you're going to need to be vulnerable. You're going to be open to things that aren't going the way you intended. There's going to be things that I thought I was trying to do, and the impact was the complete opposite side. If I'm open to that and can say, "Wow, what happened to you? I saw this impact. It didn't look really good," rather than, "She's having a hard day." And then you'd say, "Oh, actually here's the way I took it, is you said, 'Gosh, we need to get somebody who can really do the work here.'" And you thought it was a personal criticism of you and I was talking about something completely else.

If I'm willing to go in that space, you can trust that I have your back. It's an emotionally safe place, that psychological safety thing. And when we get to that, I think then people will be willing to say, "Hey, I disagree with you because I know you're okay, and I'm okay." And the commitment we have is so much stronger. So it's really vital.

And we have that deep commitment. I would hold you accountable. And like I said, it's not always... It sounds punitive usually, but it could be, "I'm going to help you out because we all lose if you lose." And when we lean on that-

Erika:

It's, "We're all in it together."

Chris:

Exactly. Exactly. And so I think the leader's thing is like, "Where are we headed? I want your inputs in this. Where are we struggling? What can we do about it?" And being willing to take the first step to say, "I don't know. I need some help. We can be better. I'm struggling here," which is anathema to many people who are like, "I just want a big wake behind me going so damn fast." But that leaves trails of carnage. So if we can do that all together, everybody makes it. That's best... I mean, if you have somebody's off for themselves, that's different. But in terms of if you're willing to be part of this team to make this great mission happen, "Oh by the way, here's your job."

Erika:

Awesome. So Chris, I want to make sure we have a few minutes for you to say, if I wanted somebody who is listening, here's the top three things that I want them to think about, as we wrap it up. And take your time. Because I do think we've covered a lot of ground today, but I know they could all... Each of these subs could be a podcast in and of itself, or a workshop, or et cetera. So if I'm a founder or I'm an executive at one of these high growth companies, or I'm aspiring to be, what are my top three things?

Chris:

Great question. The first thing is that Erika, I would like you to know, and everybody who's listening, to know you are not alone. You are not alone. There are many, many people who have experienced similar things. It's not really actually about you, even though it feels incredibly personal. So that's the most important thing, is you are not alone. Other people have done this. You're not all by yourself, even though you feel that you're not effective enough, or you're frustrated or whatever. There's many people who are just as frustrated and feeling ineffective.

The second thing is, I believe there's hope. I believe there are many, many people who have worked together to figure out how do we leverage our strengths with each other. The thing that I hate with paperwork is something that somebody else loves to do. And they might not want to get up on stage and talk to people. I love to do that, so together, way more. But I have to be open about what my kryptonite is. So you're not... Basically there's hope if you're willing to be vulnerable. Do some hard work and invest in yourself and others in time, energy, and sometimes funds, which is number three.

Getting a partner makes all the difference. Otherwise, I'm stuck in my head and trying to figure out. So it depends on what you're trying to get. It could be, "Hey, I need to talk to somebody about this emotional burden." It could be a therapist, it could be a coach.

Erika:

Or a mentor.

Chris:

Or a mentor. Right. And then there's also the pieces... That's actually I think a predecessor step to then go working. How do I build good relationships? And then how do we go make this place better? Most people go to the technical part first. That requires the people being trusted and equipped, which requires me to know myself and being an action. So whatever piece is missing, I think go find a partner that you can work that doesn't tell you how to do it. They help you uncover what you're strong at and where your limitations are.

Erika:

Perfect. That is awesome Chris. And with that, thank you so much for joining me today. I always enjoy spending time with you, but I'm so happy you were able to make the podcast today, and take the time to do it, and give some wonderful perspective to our listeners. So thank you so much, Chris.

Chris:

Erika, thank you for having me on. And I want to thank all your listeners for going out and doing that hard work, and rising to the challenge that you think a better world could be possible, and you're going to engage other people to make that happen. I know that's what you do, Erika, and it's great to be part of this.

Erika:

Thank you, Chris. Awesome. Have a good day.

Chris:

Will do.

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