

MILITARY

DIVERSITY, DEMOGRAPHY AND LEADERSHIP OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Charles Brown, General, USAF

David Goldfein, General (Ret), USAF

Kaleth Wright, CMSgt (Ret), USAF

Interviewed By: Cadet First Class Michael Greisman & Cadet Second Class Conley Walters

Greisman: Thank you all for the opportunity to have this conversation about some very important topics. At the Academy, we talk a lot about the importance of diversity and how it is necessary to have different backgrounds and perspectives. We find ourselves at an interesting point in our country regarding racial inequality. How can we continue to have these productive conversations around diversity and inclusion?

Goldfein: I'll give you a quick perspective, and then would like to defer to General Brown as the incoming Chief of Staff. There is a reason that I have stated over the years that diversity, inclusion, and equal opportunity in the Air Force is a war fighting imperative. I believe that because the global security environment is not getting better and I have not seen it getting calmer. Tensions have been getting higher and there are a number of issues at play. We, as the United States Air Force, are part of an institution that provides stability in that world. The problems that we face are wicked hard and the only way we can come up with creative solutions that our nation requires is to ensure

General Charles Q. Brown, Jr. is the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. As Chief, he served as the senior informed Air Force officer who was responsible for the organization, training, and equipping of over 600,000 active duty, Guard, Reserve, and civilian forces serving around the world. As a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff he functioned as a military adviser to the Secretary of Defense, National Security Council and the President. Gen Brown was commissioned in 1984 as a distinguished graduate of the ROTC program at Texas Tech University. He has served in a variety of positions at the squadron and wing levels, including multiple command positions. Gen Brown is a command pilot with more than 2,900 flying hours, including 130 in combat. <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/108485/general-charles-q-brown-jr/>

that we have a diverse leadership team and a diverse force that can take all of those backgrounds and experiences and apply them to that problem set at hand and not look at the problems in the same way. There are things that I see based on my life experiences that will be significantly different than General Brown or Chief Wright. We all see problems through different lenses and can come up with far more creative solutions. We do hard things well and we can only do those hard things well if we have a diverse team to be able to think through those. But, I would like to turn it over to General Brown.

Brown: Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you today. One of the things that I think about and this is something I said in testimony, and is something that you will hear me say time and time again as Chief, is that we need to create an environment where we all can reach our full potential. That is what a diverse team is all about. We can't have any part of the team feel like they can reach their full potential because of discrimination, people looking over their shoulder or prejudging them based on their background without even knowing them...you can't judge a book by its cover. That is a challenge that we have as we walk into different environments whether it is the color of your skin, gender, height, weight, all of these things where folks start to judge you before you have even opened your mouth or got to work. We have to create the environment where folks can come in and reach that full potential. A key part of this is being able to listen and understand. We all come in with our own perspectives and our

perspectives may not be the right answer. So, we have to really be willing to listen. When I meet with the other Air Chiefs, they always say, "You have the biggest Air Force. We want to hear what you have to say." But, I want to hear what they have to say. There are a lot of things that you can learn from other folks who are not like you like from a smaller Air Force, a different Air Force, or have different political dynamics. That is the part of the dialogue that has to happen to understand. Then, you can really figure out what other's strengths are and not filter before you get the answer because you may have some preconceived notions of how they are going to come across based on past experience. You may have dealt with other folks, but we are not all the same. Even people within the same group, we all have different life experiences that impact how we think and how we can contribute.

Wright: I think what is important for any leader, but especially young leaders, is to first accept that there is a problem with lack of diversity and inequality within our Air Force. I am not convinced that all leaders believe it because maybe they haven't seen it or they just don't want to believe it. That is the first thing that we have to accept is that there is an issue that needs to be addressed. Second, I would say is that every person has to take some level of responsibility for creating diverse organizations. Not everyone is in the position to hire or fire someone, but we are all in the position to learn about other cultures. We are all in the position to do things like encourage someone of a diverse background to apply

General David L. Goldfein was the 21st Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force. As Chief, he served as the senior uniformed Air Force officer who was responsible for the organization, training, and equipping of over 600,000 active duty, Guard, Reserve, and civilian forces serving around the world. As a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff he functioned as a military adviser to the Secretary of Defense, National Security Council and the President. Gen Goldfein received his commission from the United States Air Force Academy in 1983. He is also a graduate of the U.S. Air Force Weapons School and is a command pilot with more than 4,200 flying hours in the T-37, T-38, F-16C/D, F-117A, MQ-9 and MC-12W. He has flown combat missions in Operations DESERT SHIELD, DESERT STORM, ALLIED FORCE, and ENDURING FREEDOM. <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/108013/general-david-l-goldfein/>

for a job or join a group that doesn't look like them to learn more. We all need to start taking responsibility for creating diverse organizations even without having to be a commander or have hiring authority.

Something that I have seen in our Air Force when you mention the word diversity, is people shy away from racial and gender diversity. They tend to say diversity like being from different backgrounds or career fields. While all of that is true that you need that level of diversity, you have to be specific about having diverse organizations that include minority Airmen, that include female Airmen, and that include Airmen of different sexual orientations and of religious beliefs. Those things are all controversial and not easy to deal with or talk about. But, if you don't deal with them up front, and you don't admit that there is an issue and take

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responsibility for it, then we will always dance around the topic. I think it is really important for people to first, accept that we have that problem and take responsibility for it. And then, call it exactly what it is.

Conley: Gen Brown, I wanted to add a follow up question to your comments and then open it up to the rest. You talked about having an environment where we can all achieve our full potential. As I was preparing for this conversation, I came across something interesting. As cadets, we are all interested in how we can be

successful in our careers. The words of the promotion order state that an individual is promoted based on the special trust and confidence in the patriotism, integrity, and ability of the individual as well as the demonstrated potential to serve at the higher grade. This seems to indicate that there is an evaluation of the both the merit of the work done by that individual as well as that overall potential that they have, which is a little harder to measure. In your experience, what is a lesson that you have learned as well as some advice that you can give in how we can balance the performance aspect versus the potential aspect of our future careers?

Brown: Your past performance doesn't always predict your future performance, but it can be an indicator. The way that I evaluate people is how they carry themselves. How much confidence do they have when they come in the room? How do they engage with their peers?

Are they an informal leader? You can have folks that are in command, but they are not the leader. You can look in your squadron right now and you know who the informal leaders are. Those are the folks that show the potential. They go one step beyond and show some initiative. That, to me, shows potential. I will tell you, the more and more you do this, the easier it is to tell when people are blowing smoke from those who actually have game. It is a bit hard to quantify, because it isn't one or two attributes. Their level of confidence is important because you are going to put them in a tough situation. As you are moving up to the next level, if they can't handle the situation that they are in today, they are going to have a hard time handling the situation above them at the next level. The bottom line is that you have

Chief Master Sergeant Kaleth O. Wright was the 18th Chief Master Sergeant of the United States Air Force. In that capacity, he served as the senior enlisted member in the Air Force and was responsible for providing guidance and direction for the 410,000 member enlisted force. Chief Wright entered the Air Force in 1989 and served in numerous positions such as professional military education instructor, dental assistant, flight chief, superintendent, and command chief on multiple occasions. He earned his Bachelor's Degree in Business Management, his Master's Degree in Business Administration, and has numerous other certifications at the executive level. He is currently the CEO of the Air Force Aid Society.

to know them, engage them, and see them in action. Or, have other leaders who have seen them give you feedback about their potential.

Wright: I think an important question in this type of discussion is, potential for what? Cadet Greisman, I will take your career track as an example. Once you get into the Air Force, you can demonstrate as a Lieutenant, Captain, or Major that you are a phenomenal engineer and you know the business very well. But, let's just say that you have trouble connecting with people or you might have some character flaws. When asking about potential, you might have the potential to be a great staff officer or you might have the potential to go on and do something that requires you to be good at the business of engineering, but maybe not a great commander. Potential is really hard and I agree with General Brown. It is usually centered around character issues and how well you connect with people, how well you inspire or encourage people, and how well you build relationships. When you get to the senior levels, people sometimes forget how great they were, but the skills that have gotten them to where they are today are well beyond the skills that propelled them early on in their careers. As Cadet Walters said, a lot of this is hard to measure. We don't typically write them down. You won't always see them in OPRs/EPRs. A lot of potential is spread through word of mouth. Again, I always start with the question, potential for what, before I decide on whether someone has potential to move forward for any specific position.

Walters: That is a great point about potential for what? How can we start to develop that potential? What are some steps that we can take to develop those skills and traits that we will need to be successful leaders?

Wright: Just like the other gentlemen here, I am a huge consumer of books, podcasts, and information to always get better. I also study leaders that I admire, like the two of them. I will tell you that over the last three years, I have had a front row seat and kind of Ph.D. in leadership sitting beside General Goldfein and watching him deal with situations and how he responds. How he deals with people has been amazing to watch, learn, and grow. I would also say to do an assessment of the areas that you need help in and to know your weaknesses and put some time into developing those areas. Also, make sure that you put time and effort into improving whatever you are really good at because skills do atrophy if you don't use them. It involves reading, learning, and finding someone you admire. You might not have the opportunity to sit next to the Chief of Staff of the Air Force like I have, but there are many great leaders at USAFA and at the bases you will head out to. Many of them you will learn from watching what they say and do. I would also say to get out of your comfort zone. Cadet Greisman, don't just find engineers and Cadet Walters, don't just find medics. If you see someone on the base or in the Air Force that you admire, invite them for a cup of coffee and start a dialogue and ask them some questions. Most great leaders love sharing and passing along information. A lot of the skills that we talk about

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in leadership are centered around being good human beings. Never forget what it means to be a good person and take care of people.

Brown: I would add to always be willing to learn. At every level, you are still learning as a leader. You are going to be dealing with situations that you didn't plan for and different dynamics. One of the things I mention when I talk about leadership is if on a scale of 1 to 10 you are a 2, then you will likely never be a 10. What I mean by that is you need to understand where your skill sets are. If you are a 6 or 7 and you work hard at it, you can get to a 10. If you are a 2, then you can work hard and get yourself to a 5 or 6, which is average. That is why you want to have a team and you want to have diversity because someone else is going to have a skill set that you don't have. You have to be self-aware. For example, I am an introvert and I know that. I have to work really hard sometimes to make small talk in certain situations. We can talk flying, Air Force, NFL, barbequing, and I am in. Other topics can take work, and I know that. That is an aspect of knowing yourself as you develop your leadership. I am married to an extrovert, so that actually helps me. That is really building your team. That is the thing that you need to think about when you are building diversity in your team. If you don't have a good understanding about a certain area, having someone on your team that understands that better, makes you a better leader. You help them as well. That is part of leadership of not what you do for yourself, but what you do for those around you.

Goldfein: I wanted to build on that theme of continuing to learn. I will give you a real world example that is as current as last night. Here I am, 37 years after graduating from the Academy. I was on Facebook last night. I'm not on there very often, but every now and then I try to get out there and see what Airmen are talking about. I read a post from a young man where he wrote that he was in line to meet the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force and he kept referring to him as Sergeant. Somebody corrected him and told him that he had to refer to him as Chief. The young man responded that "I would, but that I only use that term to refer to my elders." He is a Native American and it was an 'Aha' moment for me. I have been in this post for four years and until I read that post last night, I had never associated the title of Chief with a Native American and the respect that they show to their elders and how hard it is to become a Chief in an American Indian tribe. So, I wrote him back. I said, "I had not ever considered the connection and I will live in a way that is respectful to your tribe. If you are willing, I'd like to have someone follow up with you so that I can learn more." I came in this morning and talked to our Public Affairs team and wanted to know how we could connect with this young man. I hope to talk to him tonight or tomorrow. Here I am, 37 years later and people have been calling me Chief every day, and I never thought about how I have an obligation as Chief to connect with those who have earned that title as Native Americans. To General Brown's point, you never stop learning and growing in your jobs.

Cadet Second Class Conley L. Walters is a Biology major and Portuguese minor from the Class of 2022. He is a member of Cadet Squadron 32, the "Road Runners", serves as the NCLS 2021 NCO In Charge, and is from McKinney, TX. It became his ambition to attend the Air Force Academy and pursue the medical field due to his love and gratitude for human life. These traits have served him well at the Academy as well as during the two-year mission in Brazil he served post-4 Degree (Freshman) year. After returning to the Academy, he strives to share his new appreciation for diversity, life, and character with his classmates, faculty, and the Airmen he will lead. After graduation, Conley hopes to attend medical school and serve as an Air Force neurologist.

Greisman: Part of learning is having critical conversations. Sometimes, those conversations can be awkward. What suggestions do you have for us to lead more inclusively and to get those conversations started where we can have change?

Wright: I do a lot of public speaking and the only time I feel uncomfortable is when I am not prepared. When I don't know enough about the subject, I always feel a little awkward and I don't feel as if I do as good a job as I could have. It is mostly because I haven't spent the time preparing and trying to understand the topic enough to hold a conversation about it. Sometimes, in my mind, I think that I would be better off in the audience just listening to someone else speak about this. Or, having a questions and answers with the audience to learn more about the topic. I would say that these conversations about race, diversity, ethnicity, and gender are so tough is because we often aren't prepared. I go back to the point that we all need to take the responsibility to learn more about people who don't look like us. Sometimes, that means attending an African American Heritage Luncheon or Conference or it could be as informal as talking to one of your friends who may be different from you and asking about how they grew up or your different experiences. Then, when you get into a conversation, you will have a little more context. As a leader, especially as a young leader, I can't emphasize enough that having a conversation doesn't mean you have to control it, be in charge, or have all of the answers. It is being willing to listen and people will help you take the conversation where it needs to go. They might reveal to you a problem that they are having or something that they really like. All you have to say is, you know what, that makes sense, I'll keep doing it or that doesn't make sense, but let's figure out how to stop doing that. As leaders, we sometime have this desire to always be in control of things. In many of these cases, it is more important to listen than to be in control.

Brown: Much of this starts in small groups and even one on one. As Chief Wright mentioned, it is being able to engage with someone that is different than you and to get a sense of where they are coming from and their life experiences. But in order to get to some of the harder conversations, you have to build trust first. That often starts in a small group. If you just come in guns a blazing asking what are your questions in a larger group, people may not open up. But, in a smaller group, you can start to build that trust. It is not only learning about them, it is also learning about yourself. For example, we talk about unconscious bias. Everyone says, "I am not biased." However, we are all biased about something. For example, I am not a Patriots fan. So, I am biased. I am a Cowboys fan. I am going to be biased when we start talking about NFL football. But, I know that. But we don't always fully appreciate the biases and understand them. As General Goldfein just mentioned, you may be saying or doing things that is having an impact on somebody and you are not aware. That involves a bit of self-study, knowing yourself, and reading about these topics. For example, why do parts of a diverse group feel a certain way? That will help you be more prepared when you engage. It will also help you ask smarter questions because you have prepared. That will allow for a deeper dialogue which will help you have a better appreciation for the diverse groups of folks that you work with.

Wright: If you are saying or doing something that is offensive to people, it is actually uncommon for someone to say that it bothers them because most people in minority groups don't want to ruffle feathers, be considered weak, or complain. Most of them just internalize it and just learn how to deal with it. So, you really have to be aware because not everyone is going to say something like the gentleman did with the title of Chief.

Goldfein: It is okay to not have the answers. If you are truly searching for better understanding, that will come through loud and clear with anyone you are talking to and with. If you just test driving your answers, that will also come through. It is okay to have the uncomfortable conversation and not have the answers. On this particular topic, it is quite complex, it is very personal, and if we just went with our ears and really listen to search for that greater understanding, then you have already moved the ball down the field 20 or 30 yards.

Walters: Continuing with that topic of difficult conversations, based on your personal experiences, what is something that you can share with us that is an example of when you were able to bring up one of those difficult conversations.

Brown: A good friend of mine is Lieutenant General (Retired) Sam Cox. We were aides at the same time and we were at Air Command and Staff College together. I forgot that I shared this story with him until recently when we had a conversation about diversity. I shared with him my experiences about being a fighter pilot that in my first two Wings as a Lieutenant at Kunsan AB and a Lieutenant and Captain at Homestead AFB, there were only two African Americans in the entire Wing. I was in one Squadron, and the other African American was in the other Squadron. I talked to him about what it was like to be the only person in the room. He reflected that in high school, he was a basketball player and he was the only white player on the team. His point to me was that he only had to play a game, but that I had to walk through life. It is really understanding that kind of dynamic that you have to prove yourself. We had a conversation in a session not too long ago that when you grow up as an African American, you are sometimes going to have to work twice as hard to prove yourself because there is already a preconceived notion that you are in because of diversity issues, instead

of being fully qualified. For example, everyone needs to meet the standard to get into the Academy. That is a given. That doesn't mean that everyone picked has to be the best person though. I will go back to the NFL as an example. When they have the football combine, everybody runs in different sections and are divided by their position. When you pick a team, you don't have a

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team of 11 quarterbacks. If you did that, you would not have a great team. That is why you have to have different levels of people that come into this.

The last thing I would share on this is that there are several books that talk about the head start. In some cases they talk about the 400 year head start. That is because of slavery and other things that have been put into place. I'll offer to you that there is a good Netflix documentary titled *13th*. It talks about what happened to the freeing of the slaves with the 13th Amendment and all of the roadblocks that were put in over time. The analogy is that if you are running a track race and one person has a flat track and the other one has hurdles, the one who doesn't have the hurdles is going to get there faster. We can do affirmative action type of things, but it is not just one time. That is the challenge that we run into. We do a little bit and then think that we have covered it and go back to what we were doing before. That is why you need to have these opportunities to bring people in. They have to be fully qualified, of course, but it doesn't mean that you always pick the top of the list of all one type. You have to have the top of the list from a variety of types of diverse people.

Wright: I think we should first acknowledge that what makes a successful cadet or a successful Air Force officer, academic excellence might be in the top five, but it might not be. There are studies that were done on all of the Service Academies that determined that grit was the determining factor as to who was successful and who was not over things like GPA and SAT scores. One, it might be time for us to consider using other means to determine who should be admitted other than just high test scores. Like General Brown was referring to, you

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can trace back to the disparity in education systems and resources where minorities might end up with lower scores. Maybe consider things like grit and other factors that relate to good Air Force officers. General Brown just selected the first female Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force to replace me. Some people will say that she was a diversity pick or she was picked for gender. I have already had to engage in those conversations to say no, that she was selected through a very thorough process because she had the skills and potential to serve in this role. Sometimes we will say that he or she was the right person at the right time for this job which to me is a little bit of a poke. Certainly they were the right person like any other person was the right person at the right time. They were the best candidate period. You don't have to say anything else. That is something that minorities deal with all of the time. Even if you are the best, there are still people that will judge you and say that you were only selected because you were black or a female, or what have you. We just have to confront stuff like that head on. It starts with education and understanding. It's great that you have great test scores. Lots of people have great test scores, but there are other things that will also make you successful at USAFA that include important things like character, grit, and building relationships.

They may not be as easily measurable as the things that people tend to believe that got them to where they are.

Goldfein: I'd offer that Conley, Mike and I's experience were probably pretty similar. We competed to get into the Academy in a system that was designed by us for us. So, our experience was unique in that we were part of the majority that comes into the Academy. Therefore, we are not going to see the things that are intentionally or unintentionally pejorative to those that don't look like us or sound like us. We need to have a bit of skepticism in terms of looking at processes and procedures and questioning whether they work equally well for all of us. For example, we took on a complete overhaul of our Officer Promotion System and development for promotions. It was the first time since the early 1980's. I had to start the conversation by looking at a table of General Officers. I said, "Let's start this conversation by acknowledging that we are about to change the system that worked pretty well for all of us. What is wrong with the promotion system? It worked for us. The question is, does it work for all of us? Does it produce the talented leaders we need to not only represent America but can also bring that diverse background, life experiences, what we need to lead the Air Force in times of global security challenges?" As you prepare to graduate and move up, take a good healthy look at the processes and procedures and then go to your teammates that don't sound and look like you and listen to their experiences and what it was like for them to compete. Really listen to see if the system truly works for all of us. If we ever start to congratulate ourselves that we got it all right, it is time to be very afraid.

Greisman: Shifting gears a bit, I have a question for each of you. General Goldfein, what are your reflections on what you were able to accomplish as the Chief? General Brown, what are some of your goals heading into the position? Finally, Chief Wright, what are your reflections about your time and what you are handing

off to Chief Bass as the next Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force?

Goldfein: About every two weeks, I sign condolence letters to parents and spouses of Airmen who commit suicide. That is the worst part of this job because I know I am signing a letter to someone whose life has been destroyed because of a tragic decision that a young Airman made when they transitioned from hopeful to hopeless on our watch. That is one of the parts that we didn't get to enough. We worked it hard but we didn't make enough of a dent. There are a lot of reasons for that, but I would have loved to have handed off to Chief Brown, an Air Force where he didn't have to sign these letters.

Wright: I learned some time ago, to live with no regrets. While there are things like the boss just mentioned and lots of areas of our Air Force where I wish I could say I wish we had a do over, I try to live my life with no regrets. We gave the Air Force everything that we had during our time. I think that philosophy actually helps us because it says that there is no time for tomorrow and there is no saving it for the next person. We have to act now. We did that in a lot of cases. Some things we implemented and tried and they didn't turn out as well as we expected. But in other things, they turned out really well. I feel like we are handing General Brown and Chief Bass a good Air Force. We did the best that we could.

Brown: It's been a little while since General Goldfein approached me and said that they were considering putting my name in the hat to be the next Chief of Staff of the Air Force. I was fairly new into the job at PACAF and was really focused on the job I needed to do. But as it got closer, I sat down with my family and talked about the potential and really got pumped up about it. When I signed up for this, COVID wasn't an issue and the racial tensions weren't as significant.

As General Goldfein has mentioned, every challenge is an opportunity. I see that the things that we are experiencing right now is a way to accelerate the changes that we have often talked about. When you start talking about the National Defense Strategy, you start talking about diversity and inclusion, which we have been working for a number of years. For example, I ran the action group for Secretary Donley and General Schwartz. We had a whole thing on diversity and it became diversity of everything which led to a diversity of nothing. What I am really looking to do is how do we can accelerate some of these changes and use the window of opportunity we have with COVID and the racial challenges along with potential budget pressure to drive that?

Another aspect that I am looking at is collaboration. How can we increase our collaboration with our industry partners? One of the things that I have really appreciated about what General Goldfein and Chief Wright have done is being able to push things down at lower levels so there aren't a lot of top down directed programs. Getting a sense from the force and letting them design the way they want to execute things. Like we did with our resiliency tactical pause. The more we do that, the more we get buy in from the force to go and execute.

The other thing I am thinking through is empowerment in the development of Airmen. One of General Goldfein's big rocks was revitalizing the squadron. I think we have made some good progress there but I'm not sure we have empowered our Airmen and leaders down to the lowest level in some cases. We still have a bunch of Air Force Instructions that tell everyone what they have to do and I think there are some decisions need to allow them to make at lower levels. We have had some opportunities with COVID where we were able to delegate things down and not give a whole lot of guidance. If we can give intent and authority down to

the lower levels, they can figure out how best to execute. How do we get them to feel comfortable making tough calls and decisions? This leads into the whole conversation we are talking about with diversity. When people call asking for guidance about what they need to talk about, I shouldn't be giving them guidance. I want them to lead. That means I need to develop them to feel comfortable enough to lead in these tough situations without a lot of guidance because in a high end fight, that is what is going to happen. I am not going to be able to communicate from the Air Operations Center to everybody. I am just going to have to give them enough intent and authority to go execute. We have to be able to do that every day so that when they go into conflict, they are better prepared to do it. We can't start to do it day one of the war or day one of the contingency. That is something that we need to have engrained in our culture. It is a bit of a culture shift.

That drives into the whole discussion on diversity where a commander or leader actually feels comfortable reaching out and talking to people and collaborating better. We will be a better Air Force for that. We are already really good, but there is a little too much bureaucracy in some areas that doesn't allow our leaders to lead. We need to trust them to lead and we need to hold them accountable as well. That doesn't mean we need to necessarily fire them. If you go back to World War II, there were a lot of commanders that got fired and then rehired. They are going to have some "aw shucks" moments, but it is how they handle those "aw shucks" moments and how we help them as senior leaders to coach them through these processes versus crushing them if they have an issue.

Walters: Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and experiences.