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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 89: MIKE PETTERS – SUMMER LOOK BACK: LEADING THE LARGE ORGANIZATION

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. This week we wrap up our summer look back series, where we've been replaying our four most popular episodes from the past 12 months. Today's episode was originally posted in November. It features a conversation with Mike Petters, CEO of Huntington Ingalls, America's largest military shipbuilding company. For more than a century, the organization has built more ships and more classes than any other US naval shipbuilder. Huntington Ingalls is headquartered in Newport News, Virginia. Petters has been CEO since 2011. On the podcast, he discusses leadership, how he approaches his role, and what it's like to lead 35,000 employees. Here's our conversation from November 2016 with Mike Petters.

Ken White

Mike, thanks for taking time to spend with us and talk with us. We're actually recording on Election Day. We're between you and the polls, right?

Mike Petters

That's right. Yeah, I to put it on my calendar so that I have time to get there.

Ken White

You and everybody else, right? Yeah. Well, let's get to it, then. Well, tell us about your job your role as you see it.

Mike Petters

Well, my, you know, as a CEO of the company, there are a lot of people tag a lot of lot of different job descriptions on that. But I think of it pretty simply as my job is to give everybody in this company an opportunity to do their best work. And so that means knocking things out of the way for them or creating situations where they can do work, or

getting them the resources they need to succeed. But that's the way I think about it, and that's the way I like our all of our leaders to think about their jobs.

Ken White

How did you get to this role? What steps did you take?

Mike Petters

I've been in this business for 30 years, and so I had a lot of different moves. I came from the Navy to be in shipbuilding business and had a lot of different jobs in the company. Different kind of diverse opportunities but most of them were in operations. And so, from that standpoint, that's kind of the brunt of my background. But you know I, I'm not sure I ever sat up and said this is, you know, I want to be the CEO someday. I think all I ever did was I want to make sure that the job that I was in I tried I did everything I could to make that job the best job I was ever going to be in. And I tried to be that kind of person in the organization that helped people around me be better and gave my people a chance to do good work.

Ken White

Sometimes when we talk to CEOs, they'll say there was a day I remember it all came to me, and I said, yes, I want to go for that. You sound maybe a little different.

Mike Petters

Not well, I don't know. I don't know about that. I don't think there was a day where I said I'm going to pursue being the CEO. I do know that about a year before I became the president of Newport News, I had the kind of the realization that that could happen, and if that could happen, then I probably need to start getting myself ready for that opportunity. It was never a case of I'm going to go be the CEO. I actually think that I've watched a lot of people get very frustrated in their careers because they want to be fill in the blank. They want to be the manager, or they want to be the director. And you know, I think what happens is that you start pursuing that, and your ambition gets in the way of doing good work. And at least for me, that's been my observation. So I never really wanted that to happen. I believe in what this company does and what it's done throughout my career. I believe in what the Navy does. And I've felt that it's a it's our job to do the best we can here.

Ken White

You mentioned the Navy. You're a naval academy grad. What did that experience do for you? That's a huge question to answer. But in terms of your role.

Mike Petters

Well, first of all, being from the Navy and moving into the shipbuilding piece of HII, I sort of knew the language, you know, the day that I showed up at work here in the shipyard. I mean, nobody comes into this business with a degree in shipbuilding, but the day that I showed up here, I had an advantage over a whole lot of folks because I knew how the product was used early on in my career. I had some very interesting discussion with shipbuilders about how they thought the product was being used and how it, in fact, was being used. What that did for me was really created a different kind of credibility with the shipbuilders as I went and earned my steel toes and hard hat and became a shipbuilder. You know, I came at that from a different place than if I had just come in right out of college or come in off the street with no experience. It's the kind of business where experience matters. And I had a different set of experience, and so that helped me.

Ken White

Having it in your DNA. Can you imagine being a leader or a CEO in an area where it's not quite in your blood and in your genes the way it seems to be?

Mike Petters

I can, yeah. I mean, I think, you know, I think leadership is a craft all its own. And you know, I go back to my fundamental tenet of leadership is to give your people every opportunity they can to succeed. Well, that's true whether you're running Joe's Diner or you're running a Fortune 500 company. And so, and the techniques that you use, maybe the technology is different, and you might be looking at different reports and that sort of thing but having your people be successful is, I mean, that's kind of universal. And so I mean certainly there's a lot of advantages of having been in the business for 30 years. I think it's pretty transportable.

Ken White

What do you like best about your role?

Mike Petters

Well, first of all, the folks that do this are the, I mean, just the greatest folks in the world to work with. They come to work every day, putting their heart and soul into what they do. And it's just a privilege for me to be around those folks, and anytime I start to feel like the world is moving in a little bit, I just go for a little walk. You know, it just fires me right back up to go do what I do. And I feel a great sense of responsibility. I mean these, these folks are great folks, and they deserve great leadership. And so, you know, that's a bar that I try to live up to every day. And that means I have to learn. I have to grow. I have to. I have to do new things. I have to have a vision to a horizon that's further away than anybody else's. And all of that's really challenging. And I love the challenge.

Ken White

Do you feel you have enough time?

Mike Petters

Yeah, I mean, I think, you know, time is probably the only currency that we have. I think when you when you start from the premise of having good people and giving them a chance to succeed, you can use that to create time for you for the things that you need to do. Now how you allocate time is your way of telling everybody what's important, but quickly, if you spend a whole lot of time on stuff that doesn't matter, everybody's going to see that. On the other hand, by being clear about here's how I'm spending my time and here's how I'm allocating my time. You communicate what's important to you, and actually, the organization, from top to bottom, will care about what the boss cares about. I mean, my staff cares about what I care about. Their staffs care about what they care about, and so that I mean that's just human nature, and so time allocation is really important. I am pretty good at saying that's not important enough for me to put a lot of time into that. I'm pretty good at that.

Ken White

You may have answered it by just saying what's important to you is important to your team, and so on. How do you communicate? There's a ton of people who work for you. How do you communicate?

Mike Petters

Well, this is something I learned here. I think that you can fall into a trap of trying to be the leader you read about in the textbook, and you try to be this person. You live up to some mental model of what that person is. What the leader is. And I think that's a big mistake. I think the moment my career shifted into another gear was the day that I opened up my coat, and I just let people see who I was and just became very transparent and things that I was emotional about I let people know I was emotional about that. Things that I didn't want that I didn't think were worth my time. I let people know that I don't think that's worth our time to go waste on that, and instantly the feedback was okay now we get it. And I tell young leaders this all the time don't be afraid to be transparent. People want to believe in you. Your credibility is directly related to we preach this a lot. There's who you say you are, and there's who people see you to be. And the closer you make that. The more credibility you have. If you create a big gap between who you say you are and who the people see you to be, they're not going to believe in you, but if you close that and you close that with transparency and honesty, you know you don't take yourself seriously enough so that everything I mean you admit your mistakes. You want people to come and tell you when you've made mistakes, but if you can close that gap between who you say you are and who you actually are. You close that gap, you will have great credibility, and you will have people who will believe in you and follow you.

Ken White

We'll return to our discussion with Mike Petters in just a minute. Today's episode is the final part of our summer look back series, where we're reposting and replaying the top four episodes of the past year from our Leadership & Business podcast series. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education is once again offering its popular certificate in business management program in October. The five-day program is designed for the working professional who wants a cross-functional understanding of business. Each day is devoted to one business-related topic, including communication, operational effectiveness, strategy, managerial accounting, and leadership. The five core topics taught in our highly ranked MBA program. To learn more about the certificate in business management, visit wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with Mike Petters, CEO of Huntington Ingalls.

Ken White

People, followers, colleagues seek that transparency that credibility for an aspiring leader. What else should they be aware of?

Mike Petters

It is about your people, and this giving your people a chance to do their best work. That's a full-contact sport. I mean, that means you have to know your people well enough to know what their strengths and their weaknesses are. You have to know them personally well enough to know that they've just had a tragedy in their family, and so they may need some space. They just had a great big celebration in their family and so let's all celebrate with them. You got to know that stuff. You've got to know their strengths and weaknesses well enough to know that if you assign them to a particular opportunity that they have the capacity to exceed or meet that opportunity. You know you don't. A football coach doesn't assign his quarterback to play defensive line right. And so that's what the great leaders do is they understand where the strengths and weaknesses are in there, and one of the things that I really believe that. And I don't remember the exact quote, but I think it was Winston Churchill said if you treat a man the way he is, he'll be the way he is. But if you treat a man the way he could be, then he will become the person he could be. And I believe in that greatly. I mean, I believe if you start out by having great people, not picking great people, have great people, the people that you are working with are great. Now your chance is how do you harness that and get everybody pull and all those great people to pull on the rope in the same direction. It's not easy, it's hard, it's full contact, but it's a lot of fun.

Ken White

Where do you spend most of your time?

Mike Petters

Physically? Geographically?

Ken White

Mentally.

Mike Petters

Mentally.

Ken White

Yeah. Where's the thought? Where's the effort?

Mike Petters

I don't spend a lot of my energy inside the gate of the business in the sense of the operate. I mean, I review the operations that I do all that kind of stuff. But I've got really good people running operations, and they're doing that pretty well. I spend a lot of my thinking in the future, and some of the thinking in the future is around what's the culture of the future going to look like. The culture of our business what does it need to be successful in the future. Where is our customer going to go in the future? Where is our nation going in the future? So I kind of mentally spend a lot of my time in the future. Culture is something that I spend probably as much time on as anything in the organization because I think that we fall into a trap by thinking that the culture. This is one hundred and thirty-year-old company. So we kind of can a leaders can fall into the trap of believing that the culture is something they inherit. But in fact, the culture of your work team is something you create. And for me, I feel responsibility as the chief culture officer of this company, and trying to make that move, you know, does take some effort.

Ken White

So there's a culture within the organization, and there's another culture that your external stakeholders see. How do you communicate with the external? How is it differently?

Mike Petters

We spend a lot of wealth. External stakeholders take many forms, right? I mean, there's shareholders, there's customers, there are community stakeholders. I mean, we're the largest employer in Mississippi and in Virginia, and so so the communities that we're in are large stakeholders in our business. And so spending time with those stakeholders, to me, is something that you have to do on a pretty routine basis which you can't do is. You can't show up with any one of those folks and say, I've got a problem, unless you've been with them all along. So we go, and we visit with our shareholders once a quarter. I'm out on the road talking to folks who are interested in the company, who are own shares in the

company, participate in conferences about the company. I walk through the ships inside the shipyards once a quarter. Getting around and seeing as many people as you can, as many of the stakeholders as you can when you're talking to those folks, whatever stakeholders, whatever position you're in. If you're talking to them when everything's going okay, then they'll take your call when things don't go okay. And that's pretty routine. And so we worked really hard at that.

Ken White

Yeah, that's great advice. Almost every swell every CEO we've had on the podcast is looking at disruption, innovation, talking about that how the business has changed in the last ten years, how it'll change moving forward in terms of innovation and disruption. What do you see for your field?

Mike Petters

We're kind of in a interesting place on that. I mean, we have a horizon that's probably further out than anybody's. We're working on a ship right now that we know will come back to be inactivated in 2066, and we're actually on the other end of the shipyard. We're working on a ship that will come back in 2072, and not too many folks can actually talk about their work in 2060s or 2070s, but between here and there. There's going to be a lot of technological change we're working through. What does that mean to us? How does our workday change? How does the workday for our employees change? And so I'm not too hung up on the technology because I think I think the technologies are going to change, and they're going to continue to change, and actually, the pace of that change is going to accelerate. What I'm really interested in is the agility of the leadership team to take full advantage of that as quickly as possible. And so that's what we're working on.

Ken White

Final question advice for the aspiring leader. Where should they be spending energy and time?

Mike Petters

I'll go back to what I said, to begin with, you know, make the job that you're in the best job you will ever have. Always look out and try to find the best opportunity for your people to succeed and be that person in your group that makes everybody else in the group better. If you do those things, you will have a great career. Who knows, you might get to be a CEO.

Ken White

That's our conversation that was originally posted on November 6th, 2016, with the CEO of Huntington Ingalls, Mike Petters, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership &

Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education for you or your organization, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Thanks to our guest Mike Petters and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.