

## Ep28: Leadership in Conflict Management

November 8, 2019

**PATTI BRENNAN:** Hi everybody. Welcome back to the Patti Brennan Show. Whether you have 20 dollars or 20 million, this show is for those of you who want to protect, grow, and use your assets to live your very best lives.

Joining me today is Michael Buckley. Michael is a former CEO of Pennsylvania Hospital. He started his career as an infectious disease specialist and worked his way up and was invited to be the CEO of the hospital.

Mike, I just have to ask you, you were a regular doctor. How did that happen?

**MIKE BUCKLEY:** Well, it happened very slowly over time. I was at the hospital for 32 years before I was asked to take on the CEO job. It didn't happen overnight.

I took on a number of leadership positions over time, starting out, as you said, as just concentrating on being a good physician. I loved being a physician. I never stopped loving being a physician. I never stopped being a physician despite all the leadership positions.

I think the first thing I did was establish my clinical credentials and credibility over time. I think when you do that, and people trust your clinical judgment, they begin to trust your judgment in other areas that might affect them.

Over time, I was asked to take on leadership positions. Some were small, some were larger. I was the associate dean when the merger happened between the University of Pennsylvania Hospital at 34th and Spruce, and our hospital, which is the Pennsylvania Hospital, at 8th and Spruce. The hospital founded by Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Bond, a 500 bed teaching hospital, but much smaller than the hospital of the University of Pennsylvania.

When we merged in 1997, I was asked to take on a role to try and make the merger work. After that, I became Chairman of the Department of Medicine, and Chief Medical Officer. Then in 2010, I was asked to be the chief executive of the hospital.

**PATTI:** Wow. I think back to that merger, and I think back to integrating Pennsylvania Hospital into the big Penn system, and this concept of conflict management, where people are



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concerned about their careers, and what this means for them.

That skillset of being able to manage the people, and to understand their priorities, their issues, and to make this all work. Your ability to do that, you were so successful in making that merger possible.

MIKE: I think that in order to manage conflict, or manage all of these issues, one of the first things that needs to happen is that people need to trust you. People need to trust that you're going to be honest with them, that you have their best interest in mind, and that when you say something, it's the truth. That you're empathetic, that you care.

All of those things are important in good leaders. Without those things, conflict management becomes almost impossible.

PATTI: You have to establish your own credibility first?

MIKE: Yes.

PATTI: It's interesting because given your role at Pennsylvania Hospital, you had the trust and the credibility with those physicians. How did you get it on the other side?

MIKE: Well, fortunately, since I trained at the University of Pennsylvania, I knew a lot of people there who had known me for years. I had several very good friends that were in senior leadership positions there. I think the reason I was asked to do this in the first place was because they knew me.

They knew me as a physician, and they knew me as a person. That was very helpful that I had both 20 years at Pennsylvania Hospital before any of this but also had credibility "up the street" as we say.

PATTI: It's interesting because I think about the things that are necessary to even begin that process. It's important to know thyself, right?

MIKE: Absolutely.

PATTI: ...to really understand how you might be coming across and what the other party is looking to accomplish, right?

MIKE: Correct.

PATTI: This concept of emotional intelligence is sometimes underrated, isn't it?

MIKE: I agree. I think it is. People who have a high emotional intelligence quotient, so to speak,



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are very self aware. They know who they are, they know what they do and don't like and particularly about conflict, how they behave. Do they run away from it? Do they like to fight? What are their pros and cons? What are their weaknesses and strengths? They're also able to manage those things. There's self management to that as well.

In addition to that, they have a social awareness, they know what's going on around them, and they have social skills with people. They can develop relationships. They're not aloof. People know who they are. People with that kind of emotional intelligence have an easier time of it.

I would just say no one, at least no one that I know, likes conflict management. They'd rather that there wasn't any, but if you avoid it, it eventually gets you into all kinds of trouble, and things don't work.

PATTI: It gets worse over time, right?

MIKE: Absolutely.

PATTI: ...if you just don't deal with it.

MIKE: Small things become big things if you let them fester.

PATTI: Very interesting. When you think about different personalities, different people approach this differently. When you were doing this and when you were dealing with someone where there are different personality traits, did you change yourself to deal with the person that you were working with? How does that work?

MIKE: It's very hard to change yourself. You have a personality. You do what you do. What you have to do, is you have to separate the people from the problem. You can't be thinking it's this person. It's what's the problem this person's coming at you with? What's the conflict? Why is there conflict?

Very reasonable people have very different thoughts about the same thing. It's the way things are. Conflict is going to be natural in those situations and so the issue is separating that. The mistake people make is they become very hard on the people and hard on the problem. What you need to be is soft on the people and hard on the problem.

Go at the problem but not the person and figure out why they got there. What brought them to this position that they're in? One of the problems is, is that positions are conclusions. "This is what I want," or "This is what I have," or whatever it is.

What you have to get to is, "What's the interest that they want satisfied by taking this position?" How do you get at the interest and understand that?



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PATTI: Right, so what is the motivation? What's the endgame. What does it do for that person or that department? Once you understand that, then you can come together with possible solutions.

MIKE: You need to figure out where your shared interests are and there almost always are. If it's for the good of the company...In medicine, it's for the good of the patient or for the good of the department, or whatever it happens to be, or for the good of the hospital. What is it and how can you get there?

Resources are scarce and everyone's after the same small piece of the pie. The issue is, how do you deal with that?

PATTI: It's interesting because this came about because you were invited to participate in a leadership conference, and I thought that that was really interesting. I found your PowerPoint fascinating. One bullet point was, "It's usually about money."

MIKE: Yes, and certainly – I don't know in every business, although my guess is it's true – in the hospital world and the healthcare world, resources are scarce. Hospitals are working hard to make some profit margin. Some don't.

Some have a slight amount and there's never enough money for all the capital projects you'd like and all the physician things that they want, or nursing, or whatever it is you're trying to do. Because of that, you have to be very careful about making sure you do the right thing ultimately for the patients and how do you spend limited resources wisely? That's often where these things come up.

PATTI: You talk about the tools, 10 tools that can be applied to manage this conflict. To your point we were talking about this earlier – is there always resolution? Is it conflict resolution or is it managing it to get to a particular point?

MIKE: You'd like to think it's always resolved but it isn't always resolved so that everybody's happy. There's this joke that if everyone's a little unhappy, it was probably a good solution. I'm not sure about that but I do think that managing it is the way to think about it as opposed to making sure you resolve every single conflict.

You try to get to "yes" and, by the way, a lot of these tools come from that book, "*Getting to Yes*." It's important to understand that this is a process and that you have to understand some tools you can use when things get at an impasse.

PATTI: I read that book, *Getting to Yes*, also. The author is Roger Fisher. Is that the same book?

MIKE: Yes.



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PATTI: It's a great book. You don't realize that it's really about conflict management. You think it's more of a sales book which, in a way, is kind of conflict management because you're trying to persuade someone to do something that maybe they don't want to do. I thought that was a terrific book as well. The first thing that you start out with is, know yourself.

MIKE: You have to understand how you are with conflict. Do I avoid it? Do I like it? Do I like fighting? What am I going to get out of it? Do I feel good at the end? Do I not feel good at the end? Have I sacrificed my own personal feelings for it? Have I sacrificed somebody else's feelings? What about the relationship?

There're different kinds of conflict management but, in the workplace, you are trying to maintain the relationships because you have to work with these people for a long time.

PATTI: Oh yeah.

MIKE: The joke that people always talk about is the car salesman and trying to deal with where you want to get to in terms of buying a car. Well, you don't necessarily have to keep a relationship with that person, you don't work with that person. You're trying to come to a deal.

When you're talking about people you work with, either you work for, or work for you, or work with, it's important to maintain those relationships. So, the way you go about this is extremely important.

PATTI: I think that it also would be important as it relates to future conflicts, because if they know you're a fair guy. They know you're a woman who is reasonable, who's got the listening skills, and really try to understand both sides, then it's much more likely that a future disagreement or a conflict is going to be resolved in a favorable manner for both parties because you already have that history together.

MIKE: That's right.

PATTI: I thought that going through some of these tools...I love this one...the one thing about WAIT, to stop waiting to speak and start actually listening. There's a very big difference between the two, isn't there?

MIKE: There is. In fact, one of the other things that Penn does in terms of helping to train physician leaders is when you take a major leadership position at Penn you often are asked if you would accept a coach and everybody generally does.

It was a very useful thing for me. One of the things I learned early on was that I often spoke up too early in a meeting. When I did speak up, it stopped the rest of the conversation because people thought I was speaking authoritatively and that was it. This is my opinion



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so that's it.

One of the things I learned was really not sitting there waiting for someone to finish what they were say so I could get my idea out but actually listening to the person and not speaking and the WAIT is, "Why am I talking?" Making sure that you sit back, either talk last or really wait.

What people fail to understand is that real active listening is actually an act of empathy because you're giving the person the understanding that you care what they're saying. You care what their view about this particular issue is. You care about why there is a conflict and why they perceive that.

One of the things that I did in this course is to have an exercise for people to actually practice active listening which is listen to what they said, feed it back and say, "Did I hear this correctly? Is this what you said?" and making sure that they understand that you really heard them before you try to solve anything.

I think that that's a skill that really takes work. It was an important skill for me to learn and it really served me well over time.

PATTI:

I love that acronym, Mike. WAIT, Why Am I Talking? Just WAIT. Absolutely brilliant.

When you do that, you can really listen to what the other person is saying, take it in. I have learned that a lot of times what they're saying is really important to get to the answers that we're both looking for.

You mentioned a focus on interests and not positions. Again, very interesting positions or conclusions. You don't want to focus on the conclusion, you want to focus on what's important to this other person.

Again, there's that empathy coming through again. When you empathize with what is important to them, why they believe so passionately about whatever the issue might be, you can understand it and then come up with solutions that are going to work for everybody involved.

When you think about this and you're involved in this, what do you find whether it's two people, or two departments, etc. – in terms of the most effective approach in getting people to work together?

MIKE:

I think that you need to make sure that they understand what's a position and what's an interest and get to the point where your interests are shared. That you do want the same thing ultimately. Whether the same things are better patient care in a hospital situation.

Whether the same thing is a better profit margin and why that might be, or better nursing



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care, or more nurses and how that helps patient care, whatever it might be, what are the interests there.

**PATTI:** I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you there, Mike, but it's so interesting because as your talking, I'm thinking everybody deals with this. In my world if I've got a husband and wife and we're talking about a financial issue and they have a disagreement in terms of how to approach it. I've learned over the 30 years is to really zone in on what's most important about this to you.

And then they will say something and usually that's not the real answer. It could be, "What's most important to you about your investments?" "I want to make sure that they're really safe." "So, what's most important to you about safety?" "Well, I don't want to lose the money."

"What is it about losing money that's worries you?" And then we get to the real...it's security. And then I go to usually the husband who wants to be more aggressive, "What most important to you? What does that mean to you?"

We get to the same place because, ultimately, for the husband in this example when I ask, "What's most important to you?" Well, he feels it's important to invest it for growth because that's the only way they're going to be secure. They both want the same thing. They're just going about it in different ways.

Once we arrive at that by asking those questions, as you do, we come to a solution that works for both.

**MIKE:** I really think that when you dig down and work hard at it, you can find shared interests. When they really understand, yeah, we both want security, then you begin to peel back the onion to say, "Well, how are we going to get there?" Often, it's an alternative solution in our situation.

If somebody wants, let's say, a new piece of equipment. Understanding why they want that. Maybe it's because somebody in a competing hospital has that piece of equipment. When, in fact, it's not really at this point necessary or maybe it'll be a lot less expensive as technology changes in a year or so.

You sit back and say, "OK, so you're worried about them having a better market share than you are? Let's figure out another way to deal with that than buying this piece of equipment." That's what they're really interested in, "I want to make sure that my practice is growing, that I still can take care of patients, etc. I don't really need that piece of equipment right now but I'm worried."

Getting at that and then figuring out another solution, to make sure you understand, "I



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want to make sure your practice is successful. I want to get to the same interest you have. Let's figure out maybe another way to do it that would make more sense and we can get the piece of equipment next year or the year after when it's better developed, and it's smaller, and it's all those things."

So that comes up a lot.

**PATTI:** It's so interesting. As I listen to you, Mike, I think you are brilliant in terms of always instilling hope. Always focusing on the solution that we all want the same thing. You both want the practice to grow and that you'll work towards that. Again, that's why you're such an effective leader.

You are open, the people knew they could approach you and that you would help them brainstorm and solve whatever the issue might be. It is so important for people to know that you are on the same side.

**MIKE:** Once they understand that you're all trying to do the same thing and that you do appreciate why they're asking for what they're asking for, or why they're taking the position they're taking, what their interest is, you can begin to get at the solution.

Sometimes the solution is figuring out how to make the pie a little bigger, so that everybody gets something out of it. Those aren't necessarily easy but if you work hard at it you can often come to those conclusions.

**PATTI:** By doing so it becomes less of a fight, less of a conflict and both parties save face. Everybody wins in a situation like this when you take the time and really understand.

**MIKE:** Sometimes what happens is, tempers run high, people feel like, well Dr. X got this, why didn't I and they get very upset and concerned. I think one of the important things is understanding how to diffuse the tension out of these things sometimes, because if you are in a situation where things are very tense, you really can't get there.

Diffusing the tension by making sure they know you're listening to them, you understand their concerns, you share back what you heard, you clarify what they meant and then they go, "OK, he gets it, he heard me at least or she heard me at least. Now OK, let's go, what's next."

Diffusing this fist pounding, I want, I want, or I need, I need or I can't believe you're disagreeing with me. Whatever it may be, you sort of diffusing the tension by making sure you tell them, "I get it. I heard you. I understand. Is this what you said? Did I hear this right? Then, "Why did you get there. Why are you there?"

Making sure that they know that you're not just, not listening, you're really listening,



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you're really understanding, you empathize with their interest but now, how do we get there in a different way, if there is a different way.

**PATTI:** You know as I listen to you Mike I think wow, is it a time consuming process? It takes time to really listen, to reflect back and to check in from time to time. Yet, maybe I'm wrong but it seems to me that by doing that you're saving so much time in the long run.

**MIKE:** Oh absolutely, it's a time saver taking a little more time to do this carefully and right saves you 10 meetings about this in the future and a lot of pain and agony.

**PATTI:** As we pull this together and we think about conflict, is there one or two things that you think are most important as it relates to this conflict management? Again, whether it be in the workplace, whether it be at home with our kids, whether it be in any role that we have as teachers, as other leaders or followers.

Let's face it, a lot of times the team, different teams are going to have conflicts between each other. Are there attributes? Are there anything specific, 1, 2, 3 things that you think are most important as it relates to this?

**MIKE:** Not to repeat it over and over again. Being an active listener can't be overestimated as important. When people really feel that you heard them, and that you tell them you heard them and they understand you heard them, that goes a long way. It's important because you have a relationship that you want to continue for the future, that you need to have the person.

First of all, you need to consider the person you're having a conflict with is actually your partner in this, not your adversary. How are we together as partners? Getting on the same side of the table, sometimes literally, and figuratively helps as opposed to the opposite side. How can we solve this problem together goes a long way and making sure that your partner in this saves face.

That's key. That may be very difficult sometimes, but it's really important too. These things are going to come up over and over again. It's not going to stop. There are going to be other issues. When resources are tight, and people are vying for the same resources and have the same ideas and really feel strongly about the way a company should be moving and other people feel differently. You've got to be able to get to this or it's paralyzing.

**PATTI:** That's the one thing that stops, everything is that paralysis and nothing gets done, nothing gets resolved and there's this awkwardness. What makes any entity whether it be a hospital or a company or a family work is that open communication, that trust and the relationships that you have with the people that you're around.

**MIKE:** Where people really find it most difficult is when the personality issues get there. They're



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like, “I really have trouble with this person. They’re not like me. I can’t quite deal with this.” You got to separate that from what the real issue is and try to deal with it. If you don’t, you’ll never get there.

PATTI: When you see that happening, do you point it out to the people and say, “You’re focusing on the person and not the...”

MIKE: Yes.

PATTI: Call them on it right away.

MIKE: Right away. You need to get at what are we talking about, what are our interests. Let’s forget about everything else and try to get there.

PATTI: Excellent. Mike Buckley, thank you so much. This has been terrific. Thank you so much for your time and your expertise. I can’t think of a better person to talk about this whether it be leadership in general or conflict management. You are the guru in my eyes and clearly in the medical community because you’re speaking about this. You are the go to expert. I’m so grateful that you chose to spend time with all of us today.

MIKE: Thanks for having me, Patti.

PATTI: You bet. Thank all of you. Thanks to you for joining us today. Thank you for tuning into many of our podcasts. I’m so glad and I’m so grateful for the feedback that you have been giving us. I’m so happy to hear that they’re making a difference in your life. That’s why we do these things.

Until next time, I’m Patti Brennan. Thanks again for joining us and I hope you have a terrific day.



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