**[00:00:00] Speaker 1:** There are few things that make people successful. Taking a step forward to change their lives is one successful trait, but it takes some time to get there. How do you move forward to greet the success that awaits you? Welcome to Next Steps Forward with host Chris Meek. Each week, Chris brings on another guest who has successfully taken the next steps forward. Now here is Chris Meek.

**[00:00:32] Speaker 2:** Hello. Welcome to this week's episode of Next Steps Forward, and I'm your host, Chris Meek. As always, it's an honor to have you with us. Next Steps Forward is committed to helping others achieve more than ever while experiencing greater personal empowerment and well-being. Our guest today is Dr. Dana Kirkman. Dana is a leadership expert, executive coach, and trusted advisor, and she's partnered with leaders at the highest levels for more than 25 years. She leads an executive and team coaching practice grounded in compassion and relational intelligence. Dr. Kirkman is known for her combination of expertise, insightful candor, and care, and she brings experience points of view to leadership and transformation. She holds a doctorate in organizational change and leadership and was a classmate of mine at our beloved alma mater, the University of Southern California, and she teaches in the Columbia University Coaching Certification Program. She earned her bachelor's degree summa cum laude from Yale University and her law degree cum laude from Harvard Law School. Dr. Dana Kirkman, welcome to Next Steps Forward.

**[00:01:28] Speaker 3:** Thank you, Chris. It's an honor. Thanks for having me.

**[00:01:31] Speaker 2:** Now, it's going to be a lot of fun. Before we start, Yale, Harvard, USC, I mean, what's next?

**[00:01:37] Speaker 3:** Rest, sleep.

**[00:01:38] Speaker 2:** There you go. There you go. I respect that. So Dana, for people in our audience meeting you for the first time, would you share a bit about the journey you took to be an executive coach and leadership expert?

**[00:01:49] Speaker 3:** Thank you, Chris. Yeah. My journey was really more of winding than linear. If you asked me when I was a kid who I wanted to be, I could have given you five different answers. One day it was lawyer, one day it was actor, even psychologist for well people, which is really what I think I do today. And gravitating towards that trusted advisor role, I pursued law. I quickly found that consulting was another way of doing that work, advising and problem solving. And what really led me to coaching after a number of years was realizing that the people drive the numbers. It's so many decisions that hang on what a person thinks, how to influence them, what decisions they're holding. And so that turned me on and started my whole second phase of career.

**[00:02:41] Speaker 2:** And what or who was your inspiration, if anybody or anything?

**[00:02:45] Speaker 3:** So I think of two people in particular. One's my grandmother, Rose. So Rose was a big presence, working mom, taught in public schools for 40 years, teaching speech and drama. And she had this way of bringing people together and bringing out their best that really I still carry with me every day. In addition to her FDR type of accent from that generation, very dramatic, very people focused. She wrote these thank you notes in beautiful script. And then closer to home, so Terrence Malpia, who I'm so lucky to work for today at Columbia, is a real leader from the future. He's always nine steps ahead of the market and yet he listens so deeply, encourages every person, keeps the team stable. I would say meeting him also has been an inspiration.

**[00:03:39] Speaker 2:** And speaking of who, you mentioned those two, who are your top role models and what about them do you most admire and strive to emulate?

**[00:03:46] Speaker 3:** Thank you. I love the teachers and the academics. So I think of people like Amy Edmondson, who pioneered psychological safety and she really brought data to bear on an area people thought was soft. And she's got this book, Right Kind of Wrong, about like maybe failure isn't always good, but when is it necessary? Daniel Kahneman, who left us recently, such a different kind of thinker, testing assumptions. So I really look up to people like that.

**[00:04:18] Speaker 2:** So you've got those two role models. Do you have a more famous role model or another role model that you haven't met yet, but would really like to meet or plan to meet?

**[00:04:26] Speaker 3:** Oh, thank you. I would be remiss not to mention Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, who is really an icon of women's leadership who does as much behind the scenes, if not more, as in front. And in terms of thinking about all of that work, I really think about people who lead behind the scenes too. So it's crazy. But when you ask that question, I think of who's not famous, like who's advising, who's working it, who are the diplomats that we've never met or the cyber experts, including people who, you know, my father was a veteran, and I think of like, who are the people who are keeping us safe every day? So that's really who I think of as a role model.

**[00:05:07] Speaker 2:** You mentioned the diplomats. I'm working on another project for the 25th commemoration of 9-11 next year. And recently I had the honor of interviewing Ambassador Nicholas Burns, who, when the terrorist attacks happened, he was the ambassador to NATO at the time and was three weeks on the job. And for those who aren't familiar, there's something called Article 5, which basically says if one member of NATO is attacked, all of us either vote unanimously or don't vote to then become a united front. And he was able to kind of whip them, if you will, in terms of doing that. But diplomats are things that you don't think about, think about to your point in terms of who keep us safe, who do the behind the scenes work. And so unsung heroes, like the veterans you mentioned as well. So thank you for highlighting that. And then in your experience, what distinguishes a good leader from a genuinely great leader?

**[00:05:54] Speaker 3:** Now, it's such a rich question. Great means leaning into your own purpose, I think, in a way that also links it to responsibility. So when I think about really great leaders, I think about people who are present in moments of crisis, people who led hospitals. I think about people like Albert Bourla from Pfizer. I think about hospital leaders and doctors who were on the front lines of the COVID pandemic. So I think there's a humility there and also like a readiness, like a readiness to be open and take decisions and do the best that you can every day.

**[00:06:35] Speaker 2:** And looking back on your own journey, what's one leadership lesson you had to learn the hard way?

**[00:06:40] Speaker 3:** Yeah. So for me, there's a school of thought that when you're under stress, you do the opposite of what you would naturally do. And that's what happened to me. So my natural is I'm very extroverted. I'll talk to people, ask questions, get out there. And when I'm under stress, I actually hide and freeze. And those are the times when I have had bad experiences of either decision fatigue or not communicating enough with my team or being too cautious. I think that's the impact that stress has that I've really had to learn how to spot that and manage around it.

**[00:07:14] Speaker 2:** And before you were coaching top leaders, what personal experiences and attitudes shaped your ideas about leadership and success and have those ideas changed at all as you've gained more experience?

**[00:07:27] Speaker 3:** Well, how could they not change? You know, I think a lot about youth in stages of life and my first real job ever, actually even before I went to law school or pursued these degrees, was as a theater producer. And it was an experience of entrepreneurship. So this is me lugging carpets and set pieces around Ludlow Street in the Lower East Side, you know, cleaning out spaces that used to be a bar and making it into a show. And I think about, like, I didn't take no for an answer, really, like I recruited whoever I could and scraped together whatever budget I could to make it happen. And I think I have come back around to valuing that kind of entrepreneurship after a long corporate road where things got much more specialized and sophisticated and maybe less motivating.

**[00:08:19] Speaker 2:** Well, let me throw a little bit of a curveball here. Maybe you talk about the corporate world and as things have changed and evolved, we know chat GPT is really the new thing. Do you see that being involved at all in terms of your coaching of leaders or can they just go there themselves or is there a hybrid or is it just like chat GPT is such a new thing that it's wrong half the time?

**[00:08:40] Speaker 3:** I love that you asked that question. So this is a very hot area. I think the biggest benefit of artificial intelligence is to use it as hybrid intelligence alongside of people. And so what that looks like for me is using it as a scenario planning tool. So I'm actually presenting at an October conference about this, about how to use scenario planning to help people get more comfortable with future uncertainty and help people really project out in a way that didn't used to be possible. You'd say, well, I could do this, but I don't know what's going to happen. Well, today we actually kind of do like we do know that there's a 10 percent chance that we don't know, but most of it we can forecast. But then the emotional response is the coach part. So if I see a scenario that feels really likely to happen and the client is backing away from that, that means that there's not a personal commitment or motivation there. And then that's actually what's important to unpack.

**[00:09:44] Speaker 2:** That's fascinating. That's interesting. How has remote and hybrid worked since the COVID-19 pandemic chain and has it changed the skills that leaders need to be truly effective?

**[00:09:53] Speaker 3:** Yes. Chris, I feel like you and I were there together during so many of the 2.0 and 3.0. So the first thing I think we've become more aware of health and how health impacts work in a way that I think wasn't really on the table when everyone came to an office. Like it used to be we were in severance when people would show up at an office and then leave and you had this barrier between work and personal. In a way, I think those have merged and we've learned more. A leader can't dial back to severance. Now, does that mean that you can ignore work or do not? Of course, we all have to make sure that we're doing useful, valuable work, but I think it really raises the bar on leaders to be communicating and communicating in ways that people find efficient and fair, right? Not to overload with meetings, but actually just to kind of get started and get motivated in a way that feels accessible.

**[00:10:52] Speaker 2:** Do you point about the barriers? I mean, during COVID, there were no barriers. It was a 24-7 work day and work week and we need barriers.

**[00:11:00] Speaker 3:** Yeah, boundaries, right? That's a lot of the theme of the past few years is how to create boundaries if none exist. Yeah.

**[00:11:07] Speaker 2:** And maybe as a follow-up to that, have you seen any shifts in what employees expect from their leaders over the past few years?

**[00:11:13] Speaker 3:** Yeah, great point. So I think that employees who see leaders retreating into like a glass palace are not happy with that. So if I thought about what should leaders stop doing, it's stop living in the fully air-conditioned black car service world and take the subway and visit your branches and get out there because it's a get to a supermarket. Because if you are not seeing your products and your people in action, then you're missing out. That's one. And then I also think that employees expect their leaders to be listening because if brands can send a survey and get instant feedback, then why shouldn't leaders?

**[00:12:03] Speaker 2:** So I mentioned earlier that you hold a law degree, and again, from Harvard, no less, which is not a common credential for any leadership coach I've ever met. But first, what drew you to the study of law? Did you ever intend to have a long career as an attorney?

**[00:12:16] Speaker 3:** Yeah. So I actually originally got into law because of its connection to the entertainment industry. So I was in my theater producing world. I didn't have any role models who went to business school. If I had, it might've gone differently. But I did have role models in law and medicine in my family. And what I saw was that law was like this operating system that helped the tech and media business run. It was all about agreements and contracts and what have you really set up that you're agreeing to, who's on the hook for what. And it came to a head a couple of times when I had famous actors who would quit my show or take a couple of days off, and my contract didn't protect me. And then I thought, okay, there's something here. So that's really what drew me in. And then what kept me there was the problem solving, just the idea of how do we architect our relationships and our enterprise in a way that ideally helps growth. But we know law doesn't always enable growth. Sometimes it gets in the way.

**[00:13:20] Speaker 2:** We call compliance and financial industry a business prevention unit. So I completely understand that. What parts of your legal training still shape how you think and work with others today?

**[00:13:31] Speaker 3:** Oh, thank you. I want to say part of it's realism and risk awareness. So one of the things I learned from law, and especially in partnerships, is always to ask what could go wrong, even if you're really an optimist, which I am. I really have a pretty positive mindset. And yet at the same time, if you don't ask about what are the risks, you're not preparing your client well. You need to explore the full range of what could happen. And I also think that employment law is a big component of executive, executive coaching and succession in a way that doesn't always get talked about. But it is a pretty core competency to understand the employment law and what makes those long-term contracts and incentives work at the executive level.

**[00:14:24] Speaker 2:** And law teaches critical thinking, discipline, precision, and the ability to see multiple sides of an issue. How have those skills carried over into your practice of coaching?

**[00:14:33] Speaker 3:** Yeah, I'm going to say the multiple sides every day, right? Every day. Because let's say I'm brought in by a CHRO and CHRO says, we really need help in this area. That's one perspective. And it's obviously important because that's my sponsor. There are going to be five or six more perspectives. There's going to be my client, their boss, maybe they have two bosses. What does the team think, right? What do customers think? I've only seen once where a sponsor has allowed me to interview customers, and I think we should be doing much more of that. If you think about a high level of executive, what are their relationships outside the organization? So I think that multiple views definitely carries over. And fact-finding.

**[00:15:20] Speaker 2:** And building on that last question, many if not most executive coaches come from psychology or HR backgrounds. How else does your legal training give you a different lens on leadership challenges? And how do clients benefit from that different lens?

**[00:15:33] Speaker 3:** Yeah. So I think it's an add-on, right? I think the work that you and I have done in learning and motivation has a psychology element. But I think it's really thinking outside the box. When I work with founders or founding teams, and they're looking at kind of really detailed partnership or investment issues, having a legal background is a clear competitive advantage to be able to counsel people in the venture stage, early stage companies, investors. So I think it's access on that point. I also think it's not taking maybe the tactical HR view, but more of the strategic HR view, which some of my favorite CHROs, Emily Field just got named a CHRO of LPL, with a very, very strategic background. So those I think of as trailblazers in the field.

**[00:16:24] Speaker 2:** And is there a specific type of client or profession that would benefit more from your unique background?

**[00:16:30] Speaker 3:** Yeah. Our sweet spot, I would say, is people who either are founders in that venture space or in large organizations, functional leaders. So I love, love working with chief legal, marketing, chief digital officers, I think are some of the best positioned clients, because chances are future CEOs will come from the ranks of technology, no matter what the industry. So your chief digital officer is like a wonderful coaching client because they're navigating and they're handling, of course, all of the IT noise, but also all of the strategic opportunity around AI. So those kinds of technical experts who are now expected to manage at a C-level generalist level, I think I play well there.

**[00:17:18] Speaker 2:** It's amazing how, if you think back 20 years ago, the technology person was the person who checked your email and plugged in your computer, and now they're running the world. And so it's turned everything upside down, which is great because that's what happens with evolution, industrial change, and so I love that. Do you find that your legal training helps you cut through complexity when leaders are facing high stakes decisions, navigate conflict, or negotiate difficult conversations?

**[00:17:43] Speaker 3:** I do. I think there's a grounding that comes from a worldview of, like you said, negotiation. So I really subscribe to the Roger Fisher school of thought came out of Harvard Law School around getting to yes and seeing what's the zone of agreement. So I think in my team coaching, understanding what are the potential zones of agreement, what are people's real interests, and it doesn't have to be that they're going to litigate them. So I came more from the contract side to think through what are really the options to agree or to reframe our agreements or what's the way we work together.

**[00:18:25] Speaker 2:** Last question on your legal background, I promise then we'll move on. Are there times when your legal background has been especially useful, such as coaching clients in highly regulated industries, where ethics and governance are top priority?

**[00:18:37] Speaker 3:** Yes, this is again a hot topic. Ethics and governance. I think there's some of the areas I see this. One is in financial security. So things like Bitcoin, small investors, KYCs, who's allowed to invest in what, that's definitely an area. Ethics in terms of bioethics, I think is a great curiosity and growth area, whether it's genetics or drug development or participation in studies when AI is scraping all of that data. Having an ethical view to coaching is actually really a mission and it's important.

**[00:19:17] Speaker 2:** Without naming clients, because I know you can't do that, roughly ballpark, what are your percentage in the crypto space right now, just knowing that that is sort of in tandem with AI in terms of what everyone's talking about now?

**[00:19:29] Speaker 3:** Yeah, smaller than healthcare. Actually, I have a greater proportion in healthcare, meaning pharma and biotech, as well as classic financial services. Those are my current areas of focus, but definitely crypto and cyber and future and any kind of new technology base, just call me.

**[00:19:53] Speaker 2:** Perfect. And to that point, where can people find you and get a hold of you?

**[00:19:58] Speaker 3:** So yeah, I've worked through ensemble leadership. That's my coaching company. It's a women-owned business based in New York and globally minded. I work with a lot of experts in the field who think about ensemble as together. It's about the relationships and the teaming. Teaming is a verb, not just team as a noun. So that's where you would find me. And then you could also find me at the Columbia Coaching Program. So every year I'm conducting cohorts of leaders who are from all fields, HR, technology, executives, founders, who come to get a coaching certificate at the advanced level. And we are always learning from our participants.

**[00:20:41] Speaker 2:** And Dana Kirkman is very active on LinkedIn, so you can ping her there as well. So I keep in touch with her there. Dana, do clients ever get defensive when you're helping them? What's the winning approach to handling challenging questions?

**[00:20:54] Speaker 3:** Chris, so if you think about yourself or myself, we're human, right? Our skepticism in a way is a great asset. It's a mark of autonomy and it's a mark of independent thinking. So if I think about welcoming the skeptic, that helps me help them. I'd much rather hear the difficult question than not hear it. So usually my response is just to inquire more. What's behind that? Don't tell me more. I don't want to judge it. I just want to know what's going on.

**[00:21:28] Speaker 2:** Just keep peeling back the layers of the onion until you get to the core?

**[00:21:32] Speaker 3:** Yeah. With permission. Yes. Fair enough.

**[00:21:35] Speaker 2:** That sounds good. How do you balance EQ with IQ when coaching clients?

**[00:21:42] Speaker 3:** This is evolving because of neurodiversity. So I think there is a old school view of EQ as that EQ is about being nice and being friendly. I think actually EQ is about being adaptive and responsive. So an example might be knowing upfront in starting work with a client, what's your preferred mode of communication? So I have a client introduced me to wanting to do all of their prep on Trello boards with some messaging and use that so that when we talked live it felt prepared. Others will say, I just want 90 minutes in person and I don't know what I want to talk about and don't give me any homework and I just need to vent and unload and do it all in person. So if I can adapt, which is one of I think my strengths, then I can be there for what they need.

**[00:22:39] Speaker 2:** If you designed a leadership curriculum for the next generation of executives, are there legal education you'd want to include?

**[00:22:46] Speaker 3:** I would definitely want to include executive compensation and executive recruiting or the executive screening and assessment process. So that tends to be today hived off. Most of the recruiting firms have psychologists and coaches who work in an assessment unit and then their results are fed into a model and then the hiring decisions are made. But then does the coach afterward know what to work on or how to smooth that executive's journey? So I would say that the awareness of what actually motivates executives in terms of their, whether it's their compensation, their recognition, the span of control, those are important. Also M&A, right? How many coaching topics come out of a restructuring or my company has been bought or it's me or the other acquired company and only one of the two of us will be CEO. So I think that's, I would love to see some legal grounding in that space.

**[00:23:54] Speaker 2:** And not only is your law background unusual for leadership coach, which I apologize for harping on that today, I didn't mention the introduction that you also worked, you mentioned before as a theatrical producer. You talked about Rose, tell us about that aspect of your career and what are the similarities between being a theatrical producer and an executive coach?

**[00:24:12] Speaker 3:** Yeah. Chris, the coaching experience that I had as a theater director was, continues to be one of the moments I think about the most, sitting with an actor and thinking what's their motivation and how are they going to access the ability to take a risk on stage in front of people. So a lot of my theater work was behind the scenes as directing and producing. And again, supporting that person who's putting themselves out there. So I think there's like a combination of emotional support and feedback that I learned as a director that translates directly. There's also attunement to story, tone, communication, presence, how to light people up. Another kind of client work I love to do is with people who maybe think that they don't do public speaking. Well, yet. Maybe you don't do it yet. How do you do it in a way that's you, not in a way that's some kind of projection of what people who do public speaking do?

**[00:25:24] Speaker 2:** We've been talking to Dr. Dana Kirkman, and I'll be right back after a short break. Please stay with us.

**[00:25:39] Speaker 4:** Want to see what Voice America is up to behind the scenes? Follow us on TikTok at Voice America Talk Radio.

**[00:25:55] Speaker 5:** Love from the ashes, out of the grave, sweet taste of freedom, no longer your slave.

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**[00:27:40] Speaker 8:** Follow us on Twitter for more great ideas, at Voice America Empowerment.

**[00:27:51] Speaker 1:** You are listening to Next Steps Forward. To reach Chris Meek or his guest on the show today, please send an email to Chris at NextStepsForward.com. Now, back to this week's show.

**[00:28:05] Speaker 2:** And we are back. I'm Chris Meek, host of Next Steps Forward. My guest today is Dr. Dana Kirkman from my beloved alma mater, University of Southern California. Bite on it, exactly, Dana. Thank you for that. Dana is a leadership expert, executive coach, and trust advisor, and she's partnered with leaders at the highest levels for more than 25 years. She leads an executive and team coaching practice grounded in compassion and relational intelligence. Dr. Kirkman is known for her combination of expertise, insightful candor, and care. And she brings experienced points of view to leadership transformation. She earned her bachelor's degree summa cum laude from Yale University, her law degree cum laude from Harvard Law School, and as I mentioned, her doctorate from USC. So, Dana, we were talking about leadership before the break. What's the worst leadership advice you hear people dispense, and why do you think it still gets repeated?

**[00:28:57] Speaker 3:** A lot of people will talk about start with your vision, then do your values, and it's linear and it never gets revisited. So I think that's a habit that is outdated, right? Because it doesn't involve iteration or listening or co-creating. I also think there's a maybe unspoken sense that leaders should be consistent, and that might be hard to uphold. So I do really respect consistency as a big picture, but I think leaders that are too tied to their own brand or their own, that will refer to themselves in a third person. So-and-so always does this or always does that. There is no always, so.

**[00:29:46] Speaker 2:** I just think of Seinfeld, and I'm showing my age here, but George, George is getting angry. Always talking to a third person.

**[00:29:53] Speaker 5:** Yes. That's right.

**[00:29:54] Speaker 2:** So speaking of things people say about leaders, do you believe some people truly are natural born leaders, or is leadership 100% learned?

**[00:30:02] Speaker 3:** We know it's both. We know it's both. The question, I think, is how you learn what unlocks your potential, right? So I think there are those who will say the way I lead is just to be a good friend, which is amazing, right? Not everyone wants to be a leader of many people, which I think we've seen from surveys of the millennial age group that some really want that leadership role of many people and others don't. So the question is, how are you going to lead? And then also, what are you going to do to develop yourself, to stay current, to learn, to maybe push your boundaries or get out of the comfort zone? And I think that commitment to learning is probably the best indication that somebody's ready for leadership, if they want to keep evolving and keep pushing instead of just doing what they always do.

**[00:30:55] Speaker 2:** And I guess to your point about continuing to learn, is that something that would be within their industry, or would that be involving somebody with your expertise and bringing a professional coach or a combination of both?

**[00:31:06] Speaker 3:** Yeah, it could be both. Could be both. So what I see often is I see leaders who consume tons of information. Most will filter it, right? And they'll say, I took the first few minutes of this, of Adam Grant or Amy Edmondson, whatever, they'll filter it in. And that's on a leadership level, as well as from their industry. What you can't always measure, don't always hear about, is learning from their own personal setbacks and transformations. That's where you might get a coach in to say, something really big changed, either a life event, a disappointment, maybe a huge windfall, come in any kind of ways or being promoted way ahead of where they expected. And so making sense of those life transitions is also a learning.

**[00:31:54] Speaker 2:** Is there a trait that people mistakenly admire in leaders that you think is actually overrated or even harmful?

**[00:32:00] Speaker 3:** I do. I think it's harmful to be too certain that you're right. That over-certainty, we know from books like The Culture Map, we know it's valued. It increasingly is just not realistic, right? And we have been, I think, socialized growing up to trust when somebody really believes what they say. I just think it's better to stay open.

**[00:32:26] Speaker 2:** You've mentioned a handful of leadership books to our conversation. Are there one or two or three that are your absolute must-haves? I mean, we're coming to the end of beach reading season, and I'm not sure if you really read about leadership on the beach. Are there one or two that are just like a great blueprint or textbook you'd recommend?

**[00:32:42] Speaker 3:** I know. I don't really read too much on the beach, including mysteries. I love detectives and that kind of thing. I do think the latest Rewired, and now it's Rehired. Another great person, Rodney Zemel, to follow. He's just taken on a big new role at Blackstone, was a co-author of Rewired, which is now Rehired. And I think it's a great view of how the AI-driven workforce will manifest as how people organize and how people organize themselves. So I definitely recommend that one. Think Again by Adam Grant is pretty powerful. Right Kind of Wrong by Amy Edmondson. And I'd take any recommendations you have.

**[00:33:28] Speaker 2:** I'm taking yours. You're the pro. Is there a trait that people mistakenly admire in leaders that you think is actually overrated or even harmful?

**[00:33:37] Speaker 3:** So it could be harmful, I think, for the leader to overprotect. And this is another one that comes from a good place, right? People want to buffer their team. And I think it's actually encouraged, and I have encouraged it sometimes, right? Don't overinvolve your team in things that might cause tension. Now what we're seeing is that information flows everywhere. And so it is actually more adaptive and more helpful for a leader to get in that flow of information instead of try to protect people, because then it feels like you're keeping things and then it comes across as controlling or dishonest. So I would say don't try to buffer too much.

**[00:34:26] Speaker 2:** And with that, would you feel that if they're buffering, maybe other teams would not want to work with that team specifically, feeling that they have a control freak in charge or they just won't share information or dialogue?

**[00:34:37] Speaker 3:** Well, yeah, at the extreme, you might have people fleeing from that team because they don't have enough autonomy or voice. That could happen. I guess also sometimes we assume everyone wants a voice. You've probably seen this, where leaders over-ask and then they get crickets and it's like, well, what do you think? Or should we vote? And then the team is anxious to be done. So I think choose your votes carefully.

**[00:35:02] Speaker 2:** Well said. Well said. What's a leadership habit you recommend everyone adopt and one that they should probably break?

**[00:35:10] Speaker 3:** Everyone I think should adopt personal space in the day for creativity and flow. I heard from a client recently that the biggest change they made after a workshop was to protect nine to 10 Friday mornings for real creative brainstorming. This person's a brilliant scientist and it changed the entire team's experience and the stakeholders' experience, not only their own. Another one is getting health and exercise. So that will also have ripple effects. In the workplace, I would say gratitude and appreciation.

**[00:35:46] Speaker 1:** Yeah.

**[00:35:47] Speaker 2:** Well said. Some people assume executive coaching is only for CEOs or senior leaders. In your experience, who truly benefits from having a coach?

**[00:35:56] Speaker 3:** Christina, in our first week at USC, our colleague, Linda Vasquez, asked me this. Why is it only the CEOs? And I said, I agree. I think it goes with this belief that leadership cascades down. And sometimes it does. I actually think CEOs benefit from coaching, of course, but it doesn't mean that they're the only ones who deserve it. I think anyone who is committed to learning deserves it. And maybe the person getting coaching should have to show their ROI themselves, right? So it's not like a perk or it's not something you do to check the box. It's like, no, I want to coach because even if my business is a fraction of the total, it can grow to two or three or four fractions.

**[00:36:47] Speaker 2:** Love that. Are there any other misconceptions that people have about executive coaching that you'd like to clear up?

**[00:36:54] Speaker 3:** There are, I think, some misconceptions that it's a rubber stamp, kind of like consulting. And all I can say is that must be because sometimes it is. So as coaches, we have to uphold the ethics and say no to some work if it's going in that direction. Also, I think sometimes there are beliefs that coaching is a one and done. Sign up for it. Do your four or five sessions. A friend of mine described it, a banker who had a coach, as a prepaid phone plan. I used up my prepaid phone card, so it doesn't really feel very executive to me if I only get six of these. And then I also, what I know from my dissertation is that coaching actually makes a lot bigger difference in peer relationships, even than boss relationships. So that's an upside. It's a misconception that actually has an upside. I don't think people realize how good of an intervention coaching can be if it's focused on improving your peer relationships, it really can.

**[00:38:01] Speaker 2:** Are there specific signs or moments in a career when someone should seriously consider hiring an executive coach?

**[00:38:08] Speaker 3:** Big new role. Big new role. That's for executive coach. Now, on the other side of it, big transition also. For transition, I would say just take your time and be ready, because hiring the coach and then not being ready and just needing your time to transition might be healthier. Big new role, I would say do it yesterday. Do it before you have the role. Yeah.

**[00:38:34] Speaker 2:** And this might be a bit redundant, so I apologize if it is. Do you see coaching as primarily a way to fix problems? Or is it just for high performers who want to raise their performance to the next level?

**[00:38:44] Speaker 3:** So it's ideally for high performers who want to anticipate problems. I mean, there's a lot, right? So yes, I think you are helping people solve problems. So we're not fixing a person. I don't like that language, right? People decide. They have autonomy. They decide what to do. It also can be a really powerful way, though, to heal relationships. So getting in there and seeing what relationships in the workplace are functional and which ones are not.

**[00:39:22] Speaker 2:** And getting back to your prepaid phone card plan idea, can a single engagement make a lasting difference? Or is executive coaching more like a long-term relationship?

**[00:39:31] Speaker 3:** Yeah. In the best sense, it's a long-term relationship, again, as long as it's with permission. So I think that coaches who automatic bill or kind of assume that this will go on forever probably disserve their clients. Because guess what? Clients have friends and siblings and communities of faith, and the coach is not their only person to talk to. But I do think it deserves, if a coach says, OK, well, I guess we're done, that might disserve because it's kind of pulling away a source of trust or support.

**[00:40:05] Speaker 2:** And what should someone look for when choosing a coach to make sure that they're getting the right one for them?

**[00:40:11] Speaker 3:** Wow, definitely credentials, because it shows the coach cared enough to get education in this space. Not always for mentors. You can have good mentorship without going to get another degree. But I think that the credentialing shows that the coach has learned some skills and been humble enough to say, I need some more. Also industry experience. So I've done a couple of pilot surveys. And what we see is that, for example, women in tech want coaches who are women in tech. And that might be because it's such a unique and specific population that knowledge of you've been there is important. So I think that's analogous experience, credentials, and just openness to listen. I would stay away from coaches who pitch their program. This is my three-part panacea.

**[00:41:09] Speaker 2:** They bring in their blue binder and here's everything you need to know. Maybe as a follow-up to your comment about women in tech, wanting women in tech, are you seeing more interest from female potential clients or male potential clients, knowing that females are now really obviously breaking through that glass ceiling? And so are they trying to help themselves even more or are they pretty balanced?

**[00:41:32] Speaker 3:** It is increasing. It is increasing. I think you've had different topics. So I think now I see women who are CEOs or CXOs who aren't necessarily seeking coaching about being a woman. They're seeking coaching about being the next level of leader. And so they've gone many steps beyond where they started. So I think that's one. It's just the overall kind of athletic, inflected, high-performance work with really senior women. I think for people who are starting out, it's more about finding mission or finding where I can make a difference, and I think that's probably both women and men.

**[00:42:14] Speaker 2:** How important is personal chemistry between a coach and a client? And what red flags should someone watch for when evaluating potential coaches?

**[00:42:22] Speaker 3:** So I think it's very important. I think it's always something I try to do when some client will refer me to somebody else, that when I meet the new person, I'll say, please interview other coaches in addition to me. I know I was referred. Please still interview others because I think it should be a thoughtful choice. The place that that can get a little overdone or messy is if it is like a short one, if it's a three-session or a team off-site or something, you're not going to go through all of that work to interview and match and everything. But I do think that matching is important, and yeah, ask people why they're a coach and how long they've been. A lot of people will do it for a couple years and quit. So what I wish is for those folks to value, like people who used to be a coach for a couple years and then quit to kind of value it and put it to work somewhere else.

**[00:43:24] Speaker 2:** I just mentioned sort of a team workshop or just three sessions. Everyone is different. Everyone's learning process or what they need or don't need is different. Is there an average in terms of how long a relationship is with a coach?

**[00:43:39] Speaker 3:** So I think it is proportional to the size of the topic or the challenge. And Malpia, who's one of my mentors, will say, there's no only. I have only one session. So he would say, I have one session. So there's a specialness or a feeling of hospitality that I believe in for coaching, which is if I have one session, let's call it what it is and not overpromise and still make it really feel special. So if I'm getting one cappuccino, it's not the same as a whole tasting menu.

**[00:44:15] Speaker 2:** It's a very lawyerly way of not answering. So thank you. I only took Con Law one or two undergrads. So that's the extent of my legal background. So I apologize.

**[00:44:26] Speaker 3:** Oh, that's a lot.

**[00:44:28] Speaker 2:** And I did moot court too. I lost. But that's OK. That was a long time ago. If you had to choose, would you rather coach a brilliant strategist who lacks empathy or a deeply empathetic leader with weak strategic skills?

**[00:44:41] Speaker 3:** What's up, Chris? You're going to say this is also a lawyerly answer. Let me first say, the person I want to coach is the one who has the most impact on the world or who could have. So I think about someone I met in a workshop recently who had on a page a potentially transformative approach to testing pharmaceuticals. And this approach to testing could save people's and animals' lives. And it was a minority view. There were very few supporters in the organization, and yet the ROI was so enormous. So when I think about what's the potential, but that's not just because of the ROI. It's because the person dedicated their life to this pursuit. So I don't know. I don't know that I need to judge whether they have empathy or not. Yeah.

**[00:45:45] Speaker 2:** No, that was not a lawyerly answer. I actually love that answer because that was a very difficult question. So I appreciate and respect that response, so thank you. What do you love most about helping leaders navigate challenges and grow?

**[00:45:59] Speaker 3:** I really love helping. So I do come from a whole line of, like, you can't even count the number of therapists and doctors and nurses and teachers in my family, so I guess it's in my DNA. I really love it when people feel empowered and see things differently. So I think that's part of the creativity is like, oh, I could see things differently. I could make a different choice. And that is rewarding. I don't think of it lightly as somehow living through them. So I discovered through being a leader of a P&L that that wasn't actually my path. So I'm not trying to live through them. It's more like I actually do really enjoy the conversation and the work friendship and the helping and the also clarifying possibilities.

**[00:46:55] Speaker 2:** And walk us through what the coaching process looks like for a new client.

**[00:46:59] Speaker 3:** Yeah. So for an individual and for a team, it would look a little different. For an individual, I would do an intake, which is more of a get to know you, like a chemistry and also what are you looking for? What are the topics? Why is this important to you now? And a lot of future forward, what do you hope would be possible? What are you concerned about? So we can also think about if you were trying to get from A to B or A to Z, what's the role of coaching? And actually, what don't you have? So I do ask because I come from an ecosystem approach, which our USC friends know that I'm one voice and the client has friends and neighbors and colleagues and frenemies and competitors, like they have customers. So then how can I help them make sense of all that information?

**[00:47:55] Speaker 2:** And I mentioned this at the beginning of your introduction, you describe your practice as grounded in relational intelligence. How do you define that term and how is relational intelligence different from emotional intelligence?

**[00:48:07] Speaker 3:** Yeah. So I do love Salovey and Goldman and come from a, I value emotional intelligence. So the way I think it's different, so emotional intelligence is focused on self-awareness, social awareness, and then social relationship management and self-management. So how do I know myself, know others, and then act in a thoughtful and sensitive way? Relational intelligence is more about the interconnectedness of all of us. So it's less about me and you, and it's more like us and our world. And when I think about what's unique about relational intelligence is one is interconnectedness, just accepting it's a mindset that we all influence each other. And then knowing that, how do we proactively put energy into that system to make happen what we want to make happen, sometimes much faster than we expect. And then also have kind of systems and process aware to detect what might get in the way. And that could be for myself and it also could be for the group as a whole.

**[00:49:15] Speaker 2:** In your experience, what are the consequences for a leader or an organization that lacks relational intelligence?

**[00:49:22] Speaker 1:** Yeah.

**[00:49:23] Speaker 3:** One consequence, if you lack it, is getting stuck. So stuck in one worldview or literally stuck, like can't make a decision or can't move things forward. It's like if you try to push too much in one direction and it just doesn't move. So yeah, those are the risk and missing opportunity.

**[00:49:44] Speaker 2:** You also emphasize compassion as a foundation for your coaching. What does compassion look like in a high stakes executive environment where there's often face and feel the pressure to be tough?

**[00:49:54] Speaker 3:** Yes, I have faced that pressure. So I have been there. I have been uncompassionate when I was overly focused on results. So this is not like I'm better. I've been there and I've been like, sorry, this is what we committed to for our boss. And so we're going to do it and push and not listen. So having done that, I would say part of maturing is realizing that most work, even if it is saving lives, is a group process. None of us can force anything. And so I don't think actually compassion is opposite to tough. I think of tough as being fact-based, not fear-based. So if I'm going to be fact-based, then I can't hide in my office. I have to get out there even if I fear the conflict and I have to say, tell me why this is hard. And I might be opening up to, well, tell me what else is going on in your life. And generally speaking, that's going to serve better than just talking.

**[00:51:04] Speaker 2:** We have just a few minutes left. One more time. Where can people find you and your services?

**[00:51:10] Speaker 3:** So I have both a live and a virtual practice. I also have both an urban and a country mode.

**[00:51:21] Speaker 2:** Coming from a city girl, really?

**[00:51:23] Speaker 3:** I'm wearing my black. It's true. You will find me doing walk and talks in Central Park. You will find me doing one-on-ones or team events in Columbus Circle where I have a wonderful shared office with nice services and coffee and access to the whole of Manhattan. At the same time, you will really find me most of all wherever my clients are at their office or their offsite or their country retreat. So that's what I value is to kind of meet people where they are. And there's some negotiation because I'm also a parent, but I've managed to balance. So that's where you'll find me, right?

**[00:52:14] Speaker 2:** I love it. And with 90 seconds left, if every emerging leader listening to us today could walk away with your advice about how they can lead with compassion, humanity, and impact, what would that advice be?

**[00:52:28] Speaker 3:** Clear your mind every morning. Talk to people by asking questions that they're not expecting. Make the best choice you can make at the moment with commitment. Yeah. Keep your friends close. Listen to Chris Meek's podcast. Get some good nuggets.

**[00:52:54] Speaker 2:** Thanks for the plug.

**[00:52:55] Speaker 3:** Be true to yourself. Yeah. Dr.

**[00:52:58] Speaker 2:** Dana Kirkman, friend, classmate, and alum of the University of Southern California, thank you so much for your time today. It was a real pleasure and joy. Thanks for being here.

**[00:53:06] Speaker 3:** You bet. Thank you, Chris.

**[00:53:07] Speaker 2:** I'm Chris Meek. Run of time. We'll see you next week. Same time, same place. Until then, stay safe and keep taking your next steps forward.

**[00:53:19] Speaker 1:** Thanks for tuning in to Next Steps Forward. Be sure to join Chris Meek for another great show next Tuesday at 10 a.m. Pacific Time and 1 p.m. Eastern Time on the Voice America Empowerment Channel. This week, make things happen in your life. See you then. Bye. Bye. Bye.