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You Can't Get Pinned When You're on Top

Wrestling with Greatness Podcast

Action Plan Episode #23

with Admiral Kevin Donegan

On September 3rd, 2015, the U.S. Navy Central Command (NAVCENT)/U.S. Navy 5th Fleet /held a change-of-command ceremony aboard the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt where 3-star Admiral and former D1 wrestler Kevin Donegan took command.

The area of responsibility encompasses about 2.5 million square miles of water area and includes pretty much the entire middle east.

Adm Donegan is a 1980 graduate of my alma mater, the University of Virginia. In his military career he's been a TOPGUN pilot, the commander of an aircraft carrier, served in the Pentagon and in many other leadership capacities.

His awards are far too numerous to list here. Let's just say it would be like listing Bruce Baumgartner's career awards and medals. His flying experience includes over 3,800 hours in 31 different types of aircraft and over 800 landings on 15 different aircraft carriers.

Leadership advice:

The most important leadership advice, he feels, is team building. But not just building the team but rather fostering an organization that empowers people and enables them to feel like they can become better. You're never going to be successful alone so you need to not only recruit a team but also take care of those people- even when they want to leave your team for another opportunity- then more people want to come and join your team because they see that opportunity.

A characteristic he finds in successful leaders:

Carving out time for yourself to read, worship, exercise, think or otherwise.

"You may be able to lead for a period of time but you're not going to be able to sustain it."

Which would you rather have, tired troops or tired leaders?

A tough question because you'd rather not have either be tired but Admiral Donegan argues that tired leadership is more dangerous than tired troops. Because of this, he recommends taking time for yourself for reading, prayer, exercise or otherwise making sure you are operating at 100%.

On failure:

After making a near fatal mistake as a pilot early in his career, Admiral Donegan reflects back on the self-doubt that it created.

"I started to doubt whether I could be successful because I made such a basic mistake."

He obviously was able to overcome this self-doubt to achieve the position he's in today.

He also shared that in his role as a pilot and in other roles in which he's served, when you make a mistake, you must stand in front of your peers and talk about that mistake. This does two things:

1. It educates others on how this mistake happened and how to avoid it.
2. It results in respect that you were able to admit your mistake. Others, then, are more willing to share their mistakes therefore making everyone better.

"The whole organization is going to be better off when you have that kind of communication."

One habit that you do:

Take time out to spend with your loved ones. Too many successful people put their nose to the grindstone and sacrifice relationships for work. Those people will outlast your work and will always be there for you in the future when your job will not. Even if it's your passion, you still must step back and carve out time for your family.

Book recommendations:

Killer Angels by Michael Shaara