

## **BW\*F Erik Hoekstra Transcript**

**Erik Hoekstra:** [00:00:00] There are some people who are leaders because they're typically technical competence, not necessarily EQ that need to develop some charisma and some ability to live in the unknown spaces and that kind of thing. And then there's some people who are very charismatic, typically type A, very driven people that need to slow down a little bit and walk with more humility. And it's a balance.

**Tim Spiker:** What happens when a direct report walks into your office with fear written all over her face? Well, you're about to find out. I'm your host, Tim Spiker, and this is the Be Worth\* Following podcast. On this show, we talk with exceptional leaders, thinkers, and researchers about what actually drives effective leadership across the globe and over time.

You just heard from Dr. Eric Hoekstra, president of Dordt University, a faith based Christian university located in Sioux Center, Iowa, in the Midwest of the United States. Eric has deep roots in educational leadership. His father was also a university president. And [00:01:00] Eric found himself at an early age listening in on conversations between his father, cabinet members, professors, and leaders from other colleges.

But education wasn't his only interest. So was business. Yes, Eric was one of those budding entrepreneurs who started his own lawn care business in high school. But his interest in business didn't end in high school or with grass clippings. He earned an MBA in international business from the Rotterdam School of Management in the Netherlands, and eventually became the CEO of Interstates, a privately held industrial supply company.

He played a pivotal role in the company, reaching new heights in revenue and profitability. Yet amidst his business success, he was drawn back to the world of academics. And so, he traded in his role as CEO. For his current role as university president, just as his leadership produced growth in business, so too has it produced growth in academics.

Under his leadership, Dordt University has expanded its enrollment by 33%, while at the same time their peer institutions have retracted by 8%. [00:02:00] But what kind of scope are we talking about? Well, Eric describes himself as someone who lives close to the impacts of his decisions, someone who leads in smaller contexts.

In his role as CEO, the company he led grew to 80 million a year in revenue. And in his current role as university president, he oversees a student body of 1900 students. By some leaders' standards, these are small numbers, but this is something I love about the Be Worth\* Following podcast. In it, we get to learn from leaders who run the gamut from small to large, from for profit to nonprofit, from academics to athletics.

We get to learn from leaders in a variety of contexts and industries. This not only expands our opportunities to learn, but also helps us hone in on the principles of leadership that apply in every leadership environment. So, despite Eric seeing himself as a leader of small enterprises, I'm elated to have him with us today.

Now, before we get started, you should know that Eric is a man of deep [00:03:00] Christian faith. So, you're going to hear him reference his beliefs quite a bit during our discussion. That said, I don't believe you need to share his belief system in order to understand and apply the wisdom of the leadership principles he shares with us.

So, with that, let's dig into learning from Dr. Eric Hoekstra's leadership, formed equally by 18 years in business and another 18 years in academics.

**Erik Hoekstra:** I think one of the most foundational things is that we're leading people and that for me personally people are created image bearers of a god of creation and again, I don't think that matters if you're not a Christian like you're leading people and people are different than animals and plants in the world, right?

And people are in my belief system, they are Immortal they are they are going to be around forever they are created differently than animals and plants and so. No one of the things I believe in and Max Depree if your listeners have never [00:04:00] read the book *Leadership Is an Art* I think it's one of the best books on leadership I've ever read, very easy read short read but Max starts out that book with a little story about the millwright and his grandfather started this company Herman Miller and it was a wood products, wood furniture company. And back then they needed a central flywheel that, that turned big belts and these other belts moved saws, and shapers and sanders throughout the plant. And the guy who kept the mill going was called the millwright. And he had to stoke a fire every day to turn it into steam and move the cogs.

And, well one day the millwright died and his grandfather back then went to go see the family of the millwright who had died and visited them in their home.

Back then visitations for funerals were done in living rooms and so they sat in the living room with the widow and she asked if she could read some poetry and of course all the gathered guests said, of course. She came out with a bound book of poetry and read a number of poems that were very very beautiful and afterwards [00:05:00] Max Dupree's grandfather asked the widow, who was the poet?

And she said, well, that was my late husband and Max's grandfather was stunned because he had worked with this gentleman as a millwright for maybe 30 or 40 years and never knew that he wrote poetry. And, and Max's grandfather admits to say, even today, he's haunted with was this a poet who also did millwrights work or was this a millwright who also wrote poetry?

And the answer is yes, of course, to that, that we all show up every day at work as full human beings. At Dordt, we, we don't talk about like, I'm not the president of Dordt. Like, you'll, you'll hear people introduce themselves. Well, I'm, I'm the president of Dordt. No, you're not. Like, you're Eric Hoekstra. You are a created image bearer of, of, of the, the God of the Bible.

And you serve as the president of Dordt University. So, we train our team members when they join Dordt. To not introduce themselves of, I am the vice president of finance, or I am the custodian. No, you're not. It's one of the roles that you play. And I think it goes back to something. I wrote a leadership [00:06:00] paper one time about Henry Ford had this, I think very damnable quote that said, why is it that I always get a whole person when all I need is a pair of hands?

And again, I celebrate the division of labor that Henry Ford and the assembly line, you know, the division of labor is a wonderful thing. I don't try to do everything as the president of Dordt University teach biology and, you know, do admissions work and cook the food division of labor is I think a very God honoring concept that we all can specialize, but Henry Ford maybe took it a little far in the early days of the assembly line when he said, I only want a pair of hands and, you know, Tim, you and I have done work in the construction industry before.

We call construction workers sometimes hands, like he's a good hand, right? When a good electrician or a good HVAC guy, he's a good hand. Oh, what a, what a horrible thing to say about a person. But, but that to me is pretty foundational in my theories of leadership or principles of leadership.

**Tim Spiker:** So, so many of us who [00:07:00] lead have these moments where things aren't going just the way we want.

And we have this thought sometimes very consciously, I wish they would just get it done. And we have this moment of temptation where we want to look at folks that we're leading and we're tempted to think about them as full-time equivalents, FTEs, as opposed to people. So, what do you do as somebody who carries that worldview of these are whole people, it's not a millwright or a poet, it's both?

It's not a set of hands detached from a person. It's a person. How does that affect you in a boots on the ground kind of way as you lead people?

**Erik Hoekstra:** I think this is why we're called into rhythms again. Again, I'm going back to my faith commitments, but I'm a pretty type A person. I've struggled for years and years and years, decades with, with how to have a rhythm of my life that's just not workaholicism.

But on Sunday when I go to worship and I'm called in our [00:08:00] worship service to think about the week that has been in the week that is to come and I need to confess my sins. I mean, mine is a very utilitarian to say, when I see people in my organization, an admissions counselor, a basketball coach you know, whatever or back then you know, an electrician or, you know, a salesperson, it's like when I see them not multi-dimensionally and I see them only in a role that I want them to get something done for me and the corporation or me and the university.

I have to acknowledge that as sinful leadership activity and ask for God's forgiveness to see the people that I'm privileged to lead multidimensionally. You know, I've got my executive administrative assistant in the president's office now walked into my office six years ago. And her husband had just been diagnosed with stage-four lung cancer and they gave him three to five years and now he's entering his sixth year and he's doing pretty well.

There's new treatments all the time, but you know that when she walks in here and whether she's, you know, bringing me coffee or setting up an agenda or bringing me [00:09:00] minutes of notes, but, but to remember. How are you and your husband doing with this cancer diagnosis and to pray with her over the last six years and to have watched her, she and her husband just be faithful every time the treatment changes and oh my gosh, it's just so to see them, she's a grandmother, right?

And she's a, she's a husband of a cancer patient and she's the executive administrative assistant to the president's office at Dordt just to constantly remind myself that it's not just utilitarian getting stuff done.

**Tim Spiker:** Do you have a trigger where it's like, hey, I'm starting to slide towards the utilitarian. Is there a trigger that reminds you this is a whole person in front of me? And that is the person I'm leading, not just the utilitarian part.

**Erik Hoekstra:** There's a theory of brokenness that until Christ returns, the world is not as it's supposed to be. And for me, that's a very healthy thing because my brokenness of forgetting that their brokenness of messing things up.

Take knowledge that [00:10:00] things are continually broken. And there's an old quote, I think it comes from Toyota, like no problem, no need for leader. I mean, we're, we're called into leadership because not everything's going to go according to plan. I've never heard that before. That's great. It's one of my, one of the people I used to work with that, that studied Toyota.

It was like, you know, no problem, no need for leader because leadership is about fixing stuff and like making new plans because the world changed and problems happen and you know, pipes break. And I think a good theory of sin and brokenness is healthy because you realize people are going to let you down and you're going to let people down.

I've got a quote from the *Emotionally Healthy Leadership*. That's sits on my mirror that I, that I look at when I wash my hands. It says you are going to disappoint people. You are going to have people and I can name them, right? People that I know that I've disappointed who continue to hold out sadness and probably will until Christ returns.

And I, Someday I'm going to [00:11:00] be in heaven, sitting, looking at Christ, worshipping with these people. I'm going to look to my right and I'm going to be like, Ooh, I fired you in 1997. And I bet you were really angry with me until we both died. And I'm going to look to my left and there's going to be somebody like, dude, you like stole five customers from us and started your own company in 1984. And I'm still kind of angry with you. Oh, no, I'm not angry anymore. Like brokenness is real. It's real.

**Tim Spiker:** You know, one of the things that we spend over the course of this journey process that we go with, go through with our clients is we spend about six weeks solely focused on this word that you've just said, brokenness.

What does it mean for us as leaders to be on the hunt, on the search for the things that we have done? That have not been the greatest or in so many times, it's not the things we've done, but it's things we haven't done. It's the things we could have done but didn't think to do [00:12:00] and to spend six weeks, just looking for faults and flaws and mistakes, it's not a fun six weeks. I can say that for sure.

And everybody's happy to get out of it, which by the way, we go right out of that into gratitude. And probably everybody's first thing that they're grateful for is that we're done with the brokenness six weeks. That's probably the number one thing. But to dig in and I'll tell you why we dig into it.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on it. One of the reasons that we dig into that for six weeks is because we're working on the issue of humility. And how hard it is sometimes, especially the higher seat you sit in, to be aware of the ways in which we're affecting other people. And so, when you talk about brokenness, I immediately think of the space of humility.

I, I, I think of, I'd like to knock myself down a couple notches before somebody else or the world has to do it for me. Or God shows up and does it for me because I'm getting too big for my britches. But, when I hear that perspective [00:13:00] and look, I should say, I know that some people have a real, they're real challenge with that word.

And I understand that. So, there may be some other words like flawed or imperfect that somebody might need to hear depending on, you know, what type of counseling you've been through. Say a little bit about humility. Cause I, you know, these are the types of things that you and I have had the opportunity to talk about and dig into for lots of hours that are very fun, but I see brokenness absolutely tied to the idea of humility and helping us walk with just a little lighter step as leaders in service to just as you were talking about.

**Erik Hoekstra:** One of the best experiences that ever happened to me and my leadership development. You know, and again, I've got a master's degree in international business from a school in Europe, and I've got an education doctorate.

One day after lunch in a company I was leading, I was one of the owners, I was the director of HR. The person that served as their head of benefits walked into my office at 1:05, right after a lunch break, whatever.[00:14:00]

It was white as a ghost as she walked into my office, and I literally thought over lunch that she found out that she had stage four cancer or that one of her children had died or her husband had died. Like, she was that white as a ghost. And I asked her, I said, you know, Susie, I'll say is her name wasn't Susie, right?

I said, Susie, please sit down. She goes, no, I'd rather stand. And I said, okay, what's going on? And I mean, I kind of leaned in. She says, well, the Holy Spirit over lunch break told me I had to talk to you. I said, okay, what is it? She said, well, it's been on my heart for a long time. And today I just got convicted.

I had to come see you about it. A couple of weeks ago, someone asked me what it's like to work at, at the company. And I said, so it's wonderful, right? We have these, these, these core values of servant leadership and these kinds of things at this company. And it's wonderful to work there. He said, well, that's what I thought, I thought it was a pretty good company, but what's it like to work with that guy, Eric Hoekstra. And she said, Oh, it's great. He's the director of HR. He's like one of the two or three people behind this company setting up the core values and instilling them and hiring people and training and development [00:15:00] around the core values.

And I'm like, that's interesting. Cause I was at the gas station, like we're in the town of 8,000 people here, Tim. So that was at the gas station a couple weeks ago and he was in line waiting to pay for his gas and while, you know, it was a short line of four or five people and the clerk was clearly in training and new and he was on his cell phone talking to somebody the entire time while he was waiting to come up to the register and then when it was time for him to pay for his stuff, he kind of just kept talking on his phone and the clerk struggled with the machine or whatever.

And he, he was very disdainful, but staying on his phone and then just left. And he said, you know, I wondered, I wonder what it's like to work with him behind the scenes in private. And she ran out of my, didn't run out of my house. She just walked out of my office after saying that. And you just sit there in your office, right?

You're, you're an owner of this company. You're one of the five or six principals in the company. One of your people just gave you the one of the greatest gifts ever, if you'll accept it. I'll never forget that. I know her today. This is 20 years ago that she walked [00:16:00] into my office and did this and I hope as president of the university, if I, if I need that again, somebody will walk in and do it.

I don't think they will. I hope I don't need it quite as much because I still remember it. And I tell that story anytime I get to talk about leadership, but humility is the heart of it. I mean, I got, I was so busy getting stuff done on the phone while I was waiting. And I, you know, I forgot that that clerk was learning, and I forgot that people around me and it's just, it's horrible.

Whatever kind of leader you are, that stuff's always going to creep back in. I talk about that kind of stuff like a, like a callus. I don't know if you're a baseball player, you do lawn work, you're a golfer, right? You get calluses and those calluses have to come off and they come back. And I think for most of us that are type A leaders, that kind of get stuff done and forget that people are people and you run over people in pursuit of organizational goals, it's just like a callus.

You got to take it off. And hopefully over time, sanctification is getting better and better. And the callus isn't quite as big every time you have to take it off.

**Tim Spiker:** So, going back to that day, she [00:17:00] comes into your office, she tells you about this moment when you were observed out in public and it led to a question and the humbling comment that comes along with it, what happens right after that?

You know, what happens for you? Because I imagine there are some people listening who've had a similar experience. They were rolling along and something happened that really got their attention. Now, what do you do moving forward as you sit with the reality of feedback like that?

**Erik Hoekstra:** Yeah, I'm really glad that you walked right out because I probably would have tried to disseminate and to reiterate, but I had to sit with it for five or 10 minutes.

I just walked over to her office, and I said, thank you. And I kind of walked out sheepishly. The biblical story of King David when he kind of, you know, You know, appropriated the neighbor, his neighbor's wife, Bathsheba. And then the prophet Nathan comes to him and says, you know, hey, I'm going to tell you a story about this guy, this farmer and I had a sheep and somebody took a sheep and David's like, tell me who it is, I'll kill him. He said, well, it's you.

I think that, that that [00:18:00] was a moment for me and I'd, I'd read that story about David and I had taught that story about David in leadership class and that was a David Nathan moment for me and I'll never, you know, it's just the greatest gift that somebody could have ever given me and I probably think there



were a hundred people that had those stories about me and never walked in to tell me and I think that's where, that's where the rubber hits the road for people.

**Tim Spiker:** So, continuing down this road around kind of humility and brokenness. If you're coaching a leader, you know, at any level in any organization. What kind of thoughts do you have about, you know, how do we get those calluses off more quickly? How do we not go too far down that road before we correct back to a place of greater humility in in leadership? How do you advise folks to be open to that on a regular basis as opposed to Some big thing that happens only once in a while?

**Erik Hoekstra:** you know Patrick Lencioni He's got this [00:19:00] wonderful wonderful little essay called the problem with humility. And it was a chapter in a, in an edited book.

And I've lost the book. I've got the PDF yet, but the problem with humility. And he talks about leaders with, with too little charisma and too much humility. And he talks about leaders with too much charisma and not enough humility. And he juxtaposes them in just a wonderful little essay is only Lencioni can do.

He talks about a leader named Alan, who was the founder of a company who was very humble but lacked charisma. And as the company grew, didn't have the ability to be a vision caster. And he talked about another leader, Zoe. Who was so charismatic that sometimes people wondered if it was always about her and not really about the organization.

And it's a wonderful little essay. And I think coaching people is about assessing them to say, because there are some people who are leaders because of their typically technical competence, not necessarily EQ that need to develop some charisma and some [00:20:00] ability to live in the unknown spaces and that kind of thing.

And then there's some people who are very charismatic, typically type A, very driven people that need to slow down a little bit and walk with more humility and it's a balance. And it's not, I don't think our goal is to ever be 50 percent humble and 50 percent charismatic. It's our goal should be to be continually enough charisma if you want to use that, that's what Lencioni calls it. The opposite of, of humility, if you will, or the, the other side of humility is charisma, but I think we all know it right. That bigger than life person. And it's finding that balances and understanding that you're never going to land the plane every day or even in any given year or even in any given career in this

perfect spot that we're constantly working as broken people towards a vision of better leadership rather than arrival.

**Tim Spiker:** Yeah, when you say when you say charisma in that context, and I haven't read that, that PDF, so I'm going to have to, I'm going to have to dig it up. I can't wait to take a look at it, but as you share that story, [00:21:00] part of me, here's the word confidence at some level as you, as you share that story and that draws me into what you were saying just a second ago where you're saying, well, I don't know that we're shooting for 50-50 here.

Maybe what we're shooting for is a hundred, a hundred. Yeah. And we'll never get there. That's fine but aiming for exceptional humility and exceptional confidence at the same time. And for the, for the person who defines humility as a lack of confidence, you know, this is an age-old discussion, which is to say, you know, a lack of confidence does not equal humility.

C. S. Lewis, though, perhaps not the originator is often credited for that phrase of Humility is not thinking less of myself, but thinking of myself less. Point being that you tear yourself down as a leader mentally inside your own head, Eric, with the idea of being humble. In fact, what you're doing is removing confidence. And if we go with this definition of humility to say it's really not [00:22:00] about me being worthless. It's about me being more focused on others than I am on myself and how humility leads me into that. And then what ultimately does that do in leadership? Ultimately, what does it mean when we show up not to pump up our own brand or even to pump up, you know, our own numbers, but to support and serve, as you were saying earlier, so I think I'm looking forward to digging into that, that PDF.

Of course, we'll put a, if we can find it publicly available, we'll put a link to it in the, in the show notes so others can, can find it as well. But I think, I think this idea of a hundred and a hundred has some legs to it kind of fighting against the idea that we're not trying to balance it. We're trying to be all of it.

What are your thoughts on that?

**Erik Hoekstra:** No, I agree with it completely. I mean, we talk about that a lot. Jesus talked about the fact that we need to be grace and truth. You know, I know churches or pastors that try to be balancing grace and truth. Well, again, it's a hundred percent grace and a hundred percent truth.

We're all broken people, but we [00:23:00] also need to go and sin no more kind of a thing. But Robert Greenleaf, the father of servant leadership had, had some

great quotes about that. It's that the people, while being led, don't even realize that they're being led. That's, that's the pinnacle of leadership is that, you know, you can lead a group and they don't even feel like they're being led, let us to say, sort of told what to do that they must accomplish.

The servant is leader plays off of that, that, that great novel, the *East of Eden*, right? Where these people are on a journey and the person that's kind of their Sherpa leading them at the end of the journey turns up to be the king of the country. And they're like, whoa, the king of the country is like, yeah, I was leading you the whole time.

And it's, it's just an amazing thing about leadership that, that when it's done best, it's done with a very, very light reign. But at the same time, leadership is scary places. You have to have some confidence. It's very uncertain territory. Leadership decision making is, I mean, if it's a very clear decision that you should do something, well, then we don't need a leader again, right?

Leaders [00:24:00] make decisions in sometimes with lack of full confidence or lack of full information. They have an intuition that this is how it should go. And then they use that intuition to convince others to show them how it's going to end up. So, people take decisions and then they make believe that is to say they believe so much that they make it come true. And in fact, you know, I think of Herb Keller starting Southwest Airlines I mean like who would have thought that that was going to work, right?

**Tim Spiker:** and yet worked pretty it's worked pretty well

**Erik Hoekstra:** Yes, I'm just going to put out a shout out to something I've been listening to lately.

There's a new book out by a guy by the name of David Bonson. It's called *Full Time* and he talks about work and, and I just, David's a Christian as well, a guy that, that I have deep respect for. And I just hope that this whole concept of work as a task that's just drudgery and a hellish thing that I have to put up with for 40 years until I can sit on a beach in Jamaica that has so infected, particularly the [00:25:00] United States and Western worldviews in ways that I just think are so unhealthy for us.

I mean, leaders should be trying to bring joy at work to their people, and I don't do it perfectly here by any means. But like work is supposed to be joyful service. Given to God back as a gift because he's, it's created us to do this, and it should bring joy to the people you work with and everything else.

I just want to encourage all your listeners to maybe think of their work not in the sense of drudgery. There's this old term for work called Opus, O P U S. Maybe some of your listeners remember an old movie called Mr. Holland's Opus. He was a musical teacher and office most of us work in an office or we talk about, I got to go to the office.

Well, office is a, is a very, a word variant off of the word opus and opus is a word for work. That's about a creative work freely given from a craftsman rather than work as a drudgery or a task. I just want to encourage you listeners that maybe as you're leading, think about how do [00:26:00] I make work more like a concert master and a, and a work of art rather than a just the P and L's and getting stuff done, if that makes sense.

**Tim Spiker:** Well, you're, you're, you're connecting into one other thing that I want to make sure that we touch on because it's, as we talk about seeing people as whole people, as we talk about things like brokenness and humility and confidence, I also want to talk about vision because, you know, for, for folks out there that don't know you.

They wouldn't necessarily know this side of you, but but I've gotten a chance to be around you. And what comes along with all the things that we've been talking about is somebody who has a lot of vision and a lot of drive. So, let's, as we head towards the finish line here, let's talk about vision a little bit in light of some of these other things we're talking about, like humility and confidence and brokenness.

How do you see vision playing into this whole equation of leadership?

**Erik Hoekstra:** Again, you don't really realize, you know, whatever, if you're, if you're a great basketball player, you don't realize that it's hard for a lot of people to play basketball, right? And so [00:27:00] for a long time, I just never understood what it was about.

And then, you know, an organization that you and I did some work with used to do some aptitude or abilities testing. They're called the Highlands Abilities Battery. And for whatever reason, and it's not, there's not any better or worse. It's just, you are who you are. I found out that I have been gifted with two abilities, and one is what's called concept organization, the ability to see how X and Y and Z all fit together to make sort of an equation.

And then the other one is something called time frame orientation, and my wife's a wonderful person. She, she thinks in day-by-day segments, and, and she

can get things done that I can never get done. I think in like 30-year segments. And so weird thing that, that Greenleaf called foresight as for leaders.

He has these aptitudes that, that Larry Spears put together looking at the work of, of Robert Greenleaf. But foresight is a really interesting thing about vision. And somehow, we think it's this weird sort of [00:28:00] soothsayer Moses coming down from the mountain, but it is about how long you think about it. And for whatever reason, Tim, I, I've watched visionary leaders and for whatever reason they can see how an implication of a decision or of a higher or have a product or have a marketing strategy or go to market strategy is going to play out like 20 years from now.

And then to be able to put that back in place with not only how it's going to turn out, but what are the pieces to make it turn out that way over the next number of years? And I think vision is, is a combination of those things. And some people it can be developed, but I think if you're a shorter time for orientation and you want to be a more visionary leader, you have to test yourself and study organizations.

To say, okay, when they took a decision, how did it play out? Not just in the first six weeks or six months, how did it play out over a four year window? And what are the toils and snares that come alongside of it? And for whatever reason, I, when I hear [00:29:00] something, a new hire, a new product line, a new major that we're going to start, it's like, I can, for whatever reason, just see it 10 years from now.

And if you can then communicate that to the people who have a shorter timeframe orientation and who have to take all the tactical decisions about, okay, that means we have to put up a website to communicate this. We have to go have an admissions counselor to do that. Or we have to, you know, go find out if there's an alloy that's ready to make that wing strut that you're so, you know, you know, the kind of wing strut that's needed, those kinds of things.

Just having a bunch of visionary people sitting around, they'll never get anything done.

**Tim Spiker:** Yeah, that's not going to work.

**Erik Hoekstra:** There's so many great people who are skilled differently than me. And I think that's the key to looking at these people is to say. It takes people who, who are tactical and who are visionary because none of us can do it by ourselves with only people that are just like us.

**Tim Spiker:** Boy, that's so true. All right. Given the current role you serve in now, you got, you see, you got my [00:30:00] language from here on out, like I'm, I'm on, I'm on the servant because I will tell you in, in the work that I do, it's very easy for me to tie my identity to my work and what if I wasn't able to do that tomorrow I could potentially be a lost person.

And so, I really, I really love the idea of what you expressed earlier in terms of the. How do I currently serve? But you currently serve as the president of Dordt University, which means that every spring there's this little thing called graduation. And the reason I bring that up and where I kind of want to wrap things up for us is there are these things called commencement addresses and, and they come up every year and occasionally we find a pretty entertaining one on YouTube and we might all watch it, but commencement addresses.

You know, they're, they're noted for this idea that we're going to send people out into the world in some kind of special way with a special instruction. And there's an attempt to be profound and attempt to be helpful. But oftentimes there are, even though perhaps some of us are just waiting for the commencement address to get over so we can get onto the [00:31:00] party that follows afterwards.

As you think about Dordt sending students into the workforce, into the world, every single year, about 400 at a time as it is right now, leading that group and wanting to launch them forward, what's the primary message that you try to leave your students with? As they launch into the world every spring.

**Erik Hoekstra:** So, we're going, we're a small enough university that I don't give the commencement address every spring, but I do get the privilege.

So, we're going to start these next week. It's March right now. So, my wife and I live on campus and the board of trustees has given us a wonderful home that has a big room next to it. Where we can have dinners and so we invite every graduate so there's 400 of them this year over for lunch or dinner and so we'll probably not all of them except our invitation but we'll have them over in groups of 30 and I bet you we'll have, nine dinners this spring, something like that where most of them come and we talk with them and I give them a little address at that point. And my wife and I have these [00:32:00] 10 rules for life or, or, or kind of things to remember. And it starts out with the reality of the world is that nothing gets done without human effort.

So, you've got to get out there and get after it. And simultaneously, the God that we serve has ordained everything to work out just fine without you at all. So, it

doesn't depend on you. If we as sending out young people in every generation can simultaneously live in that tension, it's kind of like that same tension.

Lencioni talked about, right? You got to have a blend of charisma and humility. You have to go out in the world and believe that when you join an organization, start a job, you know, call on a customer, something's going to happen because otherwise, why would you do it? But on the other hand, this anxiety that I observe in the current generation, that they think, oh, everything depends on me.

And if I screw it up, you know, nothing's going to turn up right now, it's all going to turn out fine. So put your best effort forward to [00:33:00] the, to the wheel and push as hard as you can for eight, 10, 12 hours a day for 40 or 50 years. And then know that ultimately God's going to use your work to do some important things for the world.

If you, if you do it diligently, but live in a simultaneous, like I got to work my tail off cause people are counting on me to do something. And at the same time, you know what, I'm not that special. And it, it is just a, an absolute, whatever you're going to call it, a yin and yang, you know, kind of a blending of that.

I just, I think it's so fun to help young people see that. And I think kids put way too much pressure on themselves, but at the same time, I think there's way too much passivity as well. So, I don't know if that makes any sense.

Hey, one thing I will tell you on, I want to share this with you. It's a crazy thing that I've, that I've tried to make part of my mission. I always. Ask people. And I guess I'd ask your listeners, draw the organization chart of the organization you're currently working in your head and at the top of the paper, who's going to [00:34:00] be on that top of the paper. And I'm going to guess 95 percent of the people that just started to answer that question, have the CEO at the top of the paper.

And I just think that that's horrible. So, every organization I've been in for the last 25, 30 years, since I learned this, we flipped the page. So, at the absolute top of the page for an org chart should be in Dordt's case, the students. And then the faculty who were next underneath them. And then they're supported by the vice presidents of the cabinet. And then there's me as the president. And then I'm supported by the board of trustees at the very bottom of the paper. And I think, you know, most of our organization charts were originally written up from the battles of armies of, of, of Greece and Rome with, you know, a lieutenant and a general in this county, like we're trying to run organizations

with org charts that are about Invading Poland, and that's not what we're trying to do.

So, whoever your customer is, put them at the top of the org chart. If you're Southwest airlines, put the flying public at the top of the chart, and then put the [00:35:00] flight attendants and the pilots next, and then the VPs and the MBAs next, and then the board and the president, the bottom of the org chart.

And I think if we enliven our org charts in that way, I think it's going to create the kind of humility we've been talking about that I, as the, as the president of the university, I'm just a little guy at the bottom of the org chart. And I got to support the people who support the people who, who add the value that, that do it.

And I get, it's just a small marker that I, whenever I get to talk about leadership, I try to do. Cause I think,

**Tim Spiker:** yeah,

**Erik Hoekstra:** you know, if you actually look at the soft organizational software that most HR departments have, they can only draw top-down org charts. Like it's the default setting of org charts. And I just think that's just horrible.

So, it drives my HR department crazy when I say we draw it. We, cause they're like, that means we have to custom draw these org charts with like, you know, different software. I'm like, yeah, well, that's what we have to do.

**Tim Spiker:** As I shared in the introduction, you could tell, you could hear that Eric is a leader of great [00:36:00] conviction.

Great beliefs and faith, and it really infuses into everything that he thinks. And, you know, that's true for all of us. Our worldviews inform the way we lead. And we would all do well to be a little more conscious of what our belief systems are. This is a dialogue I get a chance to be in with leaders on a pretty regular basis.

And there's a real inquisition type of feel to taking those lenses off that everything comes through in terms of how we see the world and looking at them once in a while and thinking about how does this lens help me as a leader? How does this lens hinder me as a leader? And so, in visiting with Erik, I'm reminded once again, you know, what does it mean?



What does it look like to have Courage and conviction around beliefs and let that influence and inform the way you think and lead. So, worldview, something we should all be aware of. It's lurking in the background. We won't see it unless we look for it. And it's important to pause once in a while and take a [00:37:00] look at it.

Another thing that strikes me through my conversation with Erik is just the number of times he's referencing things that he has read. You may have heard the phrase, leaders are readers. And certainly that's on display with Erik. And an encouragement to all of us to make sure that we are continuously reading, continuously learning.

That there's really no end to that. And that it needs to be a staple in our lives as leaders. If we intend to reach our full potential, Erik's example certainly sets that up for us as we got a chance to hear all of those references that he shared. Another point that I think is really worth noting was the story that Erik shared around how the people who work at Dordt University address one another, rather than saying, I'm the president of Dordt University, which he could say, the staff and faculty are instead encouraged to say, my name is Erik Hoekstra and I serve as the president of Dordt University.

[00:38:00] What he's doing in that I think is actually pretty profound and worth all of us taking note of. What he's doing is he is disconnecting our full identity from our role. And as leaders, this is a really important concept. It might sound like a subtle turn of phrase, but I think it's much deeper than that.

What happens for us when we see ourselves as playing the role, not being the role, because look, there are going to be very difficult things that show up for us as leaders, and some of those things are out of our control and can eventually cause us at times to not be in those leadership roles. So, if we fully identify ourselves. If our identity is completely wrapped up and connected to our roles, then we really are putting our inner security and confidence at risk. And that is not good for the people around us.

So I love this idea of identifying the roles that we are serving in, rather than defining [00:39:00] ourselves by the roles that we have, because in the end, we will be more capable and stable leaders. If we have a more grounded perspective of our identity than merely what we do, that inner security and confidence will not only serve us, but it will serve those around us as we lead them.

Finally, the last thing I want to make note of as we were talking about humility and Erik shared the story of having been observed at the gas station. Not as

somebody who was particularly people oriented, to put it in a kind of a mild way. And then the courage of somebody to come to him and give him that feedback.

It's really an important story for us all to think about because it is very challenging in most instances for most people to approach their leader with difficult feedback. It's so important. It's so imperative of us as [00:40:00] leaders to do everything that we can to open that door. Otherwise, we won't get that feedback and we will be less self-aware.

Dr. Tasha Urick writes about this. She, her research is around the issue of self-awareness and it is her estimation based on her work that 10 to 15 percent of leaders are actually self-aware. That number should scare the garbage out of all of us. And what you heard in, in Erik's story is that there was someone in his life courageous enough to confront him in a caring way.

And so that leads to a question around how do we keep that feedback door open towards us as leaders as much as possible? And you do it by doing exactly what Erik did is sharing those stories, share the embarrassing story, share the story where you really dropped the ball as a leader, share that as you teach others, because that's going to do a couple of incredibly positive things for everybody involved.

First, [00:41:00] it helps draw us towards a more continual state of humility. And we need to be humble if we're going to reach our potential as leaders. So, the first thing that sharing those kinds of stories does is it helps keep us as leaders in check. But the second thing it does is it opens that door. It says, hey, you know what?

If you have some feedback to share with me, I would love to hear it. Even if it's a little bit, or maybe a lot bit embarrassing to me, I want your feedback. I need your feedback. And so, as I share stories about my missteps, especially missteps when somebody confronted me, I am inherently saying to the people around me, I would love for you to bring feedback like that to me if you have it.

It's okay to tell the emperor that he has no clothes on, as the old story goes. And so those are two incredibly valuable things to get out of sharing hard stories about ourselves, stories about when we haven't done well. So, that leads me to the question I want to [00:42:00] leave you with today. And that is this.

Are you sharing stories of your past missteps and failures? With the people around you, especially the people who report to you. This is Tim Spiker

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