



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 72: MIKE PETTERS – MAKING A SUCCESSFUL MILITARY TRANSITION

Rosanna Koppelman

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders around the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. Filling in for your host Ken White I'm Rosanna Koppelman. Thanks for listening. It's America's largest military shipbuilding company. In addition, Huntington Ingalls is a provider of manufacturing, engineering, and management services to the nuclear energy, oil, and gas markets. For more than a century, Huntington Ingalls has built more ships in more classes than any other US naval shipbuilder. The organization is headquartered in Newport News, Virginia. Its President and CEO is Mike Petters. Before taking the lead of Huntington Ingalls in 2011, Petters was President of Northrop Grumman shipbuilding. He earned his bachelor's degree from the US Naval Academy and his MBA from William & Mary. He rejoins us on the podcast today to discuss how professionals and especially service members, can successfully make the transition from service life to civilian life. Here's my conversation with Mike Petters, CEO, and President of Huntington Ingalls.

Rosanna Koppelman

Mike, thanks so much again for joining us at the Raymond A. Mason School of Business. It's always a pleasure to have you. I'm looking at your itinerary today. You're going to be talking with several students in our MBA program. And it's always a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak with a CEO and President and anyone really in a senior leadership role of an organization to give our students kind of an inside look at what it takes to be an effective leader in your type of position. The question I have for you is, you know a lot of our service members are going to be talking today with the Major General James Wright MBA students. Some of them will be transitioning out of the military, and some of them may choose to stay in the military. What advice what guidance can you give them about how to think about that transition moving forward?

Mike Petters

Transitions are times in life that's very turbulent. There's always a scratchpad of expectations that sometimes are surpassed and sometimes are not lived up to. And so, as

you think about what, you know why you're making the transition that you've chosen to make, and you're working your way through that. I think it's first of all important to think about you know what is it that you're trying to accomplish with the transition. I think that, you know, it's a bit of a naive notion to make a transition from the standpoint of, well, the grass will be greener there. I think a more mature way to think about that, or and I've watched this for many people over many years, is the grass will be different there. I can recall when I made my transition from the Navy into shipbuilding, I left an organization that frankly had my career mapped out for me. Not not in tremendous detail, but you know I was going to spend three years at sea and spend a couple of years on shore go back to sea as a department head. I'd go to school, and I would go back as an XO and go back as a CO, and next thing you know, you're 20 years in, and you kind of have the framework for how that's going to work itself out. And I can recall within a couple of months of being out of the Navy and into the shipbuilding business, there was nothing like that in the organization that I went into. And so, you know, so some of the things that you just you assume are going to be there are not going to be there. On the other hand, things that you never anticipated will show up. One of the things that coming out of the service and if you're coming out of the service and going into the private sector, time management will be very different, very, very different. You will find that I think the thing that says the most about who you are is what you spend your time on. People see what you spend your time on, and you know, in a structured environment like the service, at least the service branch that I was familiar with, a lot of your time was determined by lots of things, and very little of it is actually and time management is in that context is how do you get the most done in the least amount of time but time management in the private sector is really what are you going to spend your time on. You're going to invest time in something to get some return out of it. And so you can have to rethink that and just be aware of how you spend your time. There will be some there'll be people who'll be very successful in private sector because they can do a lot they're very productive. They can do a lot of things in a very short period of time, and they learn how to do that in the service. But there will also be people who did a lot of things in a very short period of time in the service who find out that they're much more inclined to be strategic, which means you don't see a flurry of activity there, but you see lots of return on that time investment and strategy. There's a conscious decision that you have to make. I think of it, and you know, I talk to my own team about if you think about your organization as a building and you're working on the ninth floor of that building, you know, when you start work, and you're sitting in the back row on the ninth floor and after a few years you kind of move up a couple of rows and then you know after some period of time they let you sit in the front row and then after a little bit more time you might get picked to sit at the desk in the front of the room and then you know someday you get the corner office on the ninth floor. In that career path, you know all there is to know about the ninth floor, but you may not have any idea what's going on on the 25th floor.

Rosanna Koppelman

Sure.

Mike Petters

And there's other paths where you start out in the back row on the ninth floor, and then you go to the middle rows on the 25th floor, and then you go down to the third floor for the front row, and then you're sitting at the desk on the 12th floor, and then you get the corner office on the 18th floor. Well, now you're probably trying to lead people who know a whole lot more about what you're doing than you do. And what you bring to it as a is you know you're a mile wide and an inch deep and as opposed to being a mile deep and an inch wide. Now organizations need both kinds of people, and I think that, frankly I think you have to make a conscious decision as to which way you want to go. You know when as you make the transition, and the thing about transitions that I think are the most interesting is that it's the one time in your professional career that you get to tell other people what you think you're worth. I know of you know where people are transitioning out of business schools, and they have an opportunity to go work for a company, and they decide that that's not what they want to do. So they're not going to go work for that company even though it's a great company and it has great benefits and all that sort of thing. They hang on to go and do what they want to do. My own brother transitioned from the Navy as a helicopter pilot. He still wanted to fly helicopters. So in that time of coming out, he never gave up on the dream of flying. He did a lot of things to kind of make ends meet until he got a flying position. And today, he's still flying. So you know, and it was clear that he was just not happy in any of those other things that he did until he got to what he wanted to do. And so I think that you know transitions are about being honest with yourself, giving yourself some sense of what do I want to do because the grass is different. How do I take advantage of that? How do I make sure that what I'm trying to achieve with the transition is achievable and that I have my best chance to succeed doing that?

Rosanna Koppelman

That's good. I was thinking about some of our students, and oftentimes coming through the career center, many of them who transition are really really experienced that are experienced in a particular MOS or a particular military occupational specialty, and they think that's where they should stay that that's the only pathway to get to where they want. How important is finding what you're really passionate about versus just what you're good at?

Mike Petters

Wow, what a great question. That really cuts right to it because, you know, I've seen folks who 20 25 years in the service, and they come out looking for an engineering job. And I think that's what I mean about. You know if you, if you spent 25 years in service, you have

a leadership skill that is being honed in a way that most people in business with 25 years of experience have not faced the kinds of things that you've faced. And so, I mean, I was only in the service for five years. I got a lifetime of experience leading people for those five years. I mean, I just I still go back to the things that I had to decide when I was 25 years old and had responsibility for a ship. I mean, you just those that's that's not experience that most of the folks in corporate America get. So if you want to be an engineer, by all means, we need great engineers. We never have enough great engineers, but if you want to try to parlay your engineering experience and your leadership experience into some other kind of a career, then that's what I mean about trying to make a decision on the front end do you want to be the engineer would be somebody who stayed on the ninth floor their whole career. We need all those people we can get.

Rosanna Koppelman

Sure.

Mike Petters

But don't forget that you have a craft in your bag that a lot of people don't have and that you can find ways you can demonstrate that you've been able to move around and if they want to put you in charge of the folks on the 18th floor and you've never been on the 18th floor you know how to do that. I had an experience. I think I may have told you guys about this experience, where I had these senior shipbuilders that I went to. I was 34 years old, and I knew they knew more about what I was doing, but that's sitting down with those four guys was not any different than when I showed up at my ship as an ensign, and I had a senior chief electrician and a chief electronics technician working for me. I knew on the first minute of that conversation that those two guys they knew a whole lot more about what I was supposed to do than I did. And so you very quickly have to figure out, okay, how do we, how do I figure out what I bring to this table, and then how do we create a better team and a better outcome. That's something that happens in the military every day that doesn't happen in business every day and so so give yourself a chance. You know to consider all of the things all the craft you have in your toolbox because you've got some there that you may not have realized.

Rosanna Koppelman

We'll continue our discussion with Mike Petters, President, and CEO of Huntington Ingalls, in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education helps companies and organizations from all over the world by creating and delivering business and leadership development programs. If your organization is looking to get to the next level, contact the Center for Corporate Education to discuss how we can create and deliver a program that specifically fits your

needs and gets results. For more information, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with the CEO and President of Huntington Ingalls, Mike Petters.

Rosanna Koppelman

Mike, I've heard your employees many times say that you're a great communicator, and I've heard you, and I think they're right. And I'm wondering there are a few nuances that one has to kind of master or understand transitioning from service member to private sector. Communication is certainly one of those. And the way perhaps you may communicate as a service member might be different in certain settings than how you would transitioning into the civilian sector. You have communicated across many diverse groups over your 30-year career history. From kids all the way up to the C suite all the way up to and even across that spectrum. What are those nuggets of truth that you would pass along to the service member as he or she is thinking about how do I change my style? What are those tenets, perhaps, or elements of communication that have worked well for you that you could pass on to them?

Mike Petters

This is something that I don't spend a lot of time thinking about, frankly. I consider communication to be another one of those tools in your tool bag. And you know it's tied it's so closely tied to leadership that we actually believe that people that are really good communicators are natural-born leaders. You know, when you ask a room, is leadership something that you can learn, or are you just born with it? You'll see a couple of hands say you're born with it. But most people say you can learn it, but then you ask who are the natural-born leaders that you've met. And almost invariably, the natural-born leaders are able to communicate very effectively, you know. And I think you can learn to communicate effectively. But I think that the most important aspect of communication is that you have to be authentic and honest. I mean, I jokingly would tell somebody that I can sell ice cream to Eskimos if I believe in the ice cream, but if I don't believe in the ice cream, I can't sell it to people in the desert.

Rosanna Koppelman

Sure.

Mike Petters

Right so, so you have to believe in what you're saying because the one thing people will see right away is that if you don't really believe in what you're saying, they can tell. I mean, people are smart, and they can tell, so stick to the stuff that you really believe. If you believe, bring a passion to it, and people will appreciate the passion, and then practice and do it as often as you can. I stood up in front of my church when I was in third grade and started reading the lessons on Sunday morning. So I've I was too young to be nervous about that. And when I got older, I'd been doing it for so long that I just I never got

nervous about being in front of a crowd. I know that sounds kind of minor, but I've seen folks with really important things to say not be able to say it because their nerves get them. I had a band director at one point in my life who said that if you're nervous, it's because you didn't practice enough. And so you know every chance you have to stand up in front of somebody and tell them what you're thinking you should do, and you should look for feedback. You know communication if you think about what communication is and why it's so important for leadership. Communication is taking what's in my head and getting it somehow into your head. Now we're only in the 21st century, and there may be some point in the future where you can read my thoughts, and we don't have to do all that other stuff, right? But I can just think it, and you've got it. But think about just the transition from what you thought to what you say. What's the efficiency of that? And then the transition of what you say, you know what I say to what you hear, what's the efficiency of that, and then what's the efficiency of what you heard to what you think. If you put those things together, you kind of quickly realize that there's probably less than a 25 percent chance that my thought is actually going to end up being your thought which means you've got to do it over and over again. Right, you've got to reinforce it. You've got to, and that's why you have to be true. I mean, you have to be authentic because if it's something you really believe in, you don't need a script. You just keep saying it, and you keep saying the same things, and then people will start to understand not only that that's what you believe, but they will understand why you believe it and what you believe about it, and they'll see your actions because you're being honest they'll see your actions align with your belief which will just reinforce your credibility. So understand that there's huge friction in communication and that, you know, simplifying messages is a way to cut through some of that, but repetition is a way to cut through that too. And your confidence and honesty, and authentic passion cuts through most of it and just practice. So there was a time in my career when I guess I had responsibility for human resources in Newport News, and I had only had the job for a couple of months. It was on the back end of a 17-week labor strike. We had a situation where some leaders in our organization were leaving the company to take hourly positions at another company, and we were having a big town hall meeting. The president was holding this meeting and came to me, and you know, I did kind of the usual here's where we are, this is what we're going on, this what we're doing with your benefits and all that sort of stuff the usual things that the HR guy does. And somebody asked a question about that situation where people were leaving the company. I got pretty emotional about it. I mean, I, you know, somewhat uncharacteristically for me, but I got somewhat emotional about it. I said why is it why would you choose not to be a leader in our organization so you could be a follower in another organization. What's wrong with what we're doing where we're setting that up? You know I've only been in this job for a couple of months. But let me tell you all, I'm going to fix that problem. And I mean, it was a lot more emotion than that, but that was basically what where I was, and it wasn't screaming. It was just passion coming out. I really believe in leadership as a competency of our business and how important it is to make sure that everybody's pulling on the rope in the same way and if we're not, if we're not even on a, you know, on the

same team as a leadership team, we don't have any chance with the followers you know. And so when we went through the strike a couple of years before that, the leadership team was pretty divided as a member of the team. I was I saw that. And so it became a let's get the leadership team, you know coherent cohesive get everybody in the leadership team on the same page. Not the Chiefs. You know the C Suite folks get them all on the same page or not all? It was everybody. If you are a frontline supervisor, you need to be on the same page as the CEO. And you need to put as a leader in the organization wherever you are. You need to put energy into making sure that we're on the same page, and if we're not on the same page, let's go figure out why and what we can do about that and the success of that. We spent that was three years before our next round of bargaining with the labor union. We spent those three years creating cohesion in the management team, that bargaining went without a hitch. After that, I became the president of the shipyard in Newport News and continued that energy of let's get everybody on the same page, and let's keep moving ahead. And we had a pretty good run for two or three years and so much so that Northrop decided to put all of shipbuilding into the tent. The first thing we did was we said we've got to get all on the same page. We've got to get the leadership team all pull in the same way. Three years after that, we spun the company out. It's now been six years since we spun out and this tenet of let's create cohesion in the leadership team was. And this is more than just saying you got my talking points.

Rosanna Koppelman

Right.

Mike Petters

I mean, this is I understand what your job is. Here's how I want you to think about the decisions you have to make so that you'll make the kind of decisions that we can all be proud of. And one of the things I tell my senior leaders all the time is we all represent each other. You know, if people see me, they're not seeing just, you know, Mike Petters, who lives in Newport News. They're seeing the corporation, but we're the largest employer in two states. So when they see a manager in our business or a vice president in our business who is behaving badly in some way. That reflects on all of us. And that's a 24-hour a day, seven-day commitment to the team. And I ask my team every year I ask them are you up for that. If you're not up for that, come see me, and we will. We'll be fine. We'll figure out something. But if you are not up for it and you don't come see me, and then something happens, you're in the deep end of the pool without a life jacket. I mean, it's just, you know, it's I take it that seriously, and that's about creating the leadership cohesion that we need. And I would go back to, I mean, I guess that's sort of been a philosophy of mine all my life. But it was that moment in that day when that question got asked when I think part of my answer was I don't need the newspapers or the workforce leadership to tell me

where my workforce is. I've got a leadership team here who should really be able to tell me where the workforce is. And you know, 15 years later, it's working out okay.

Rosanna Koppelman

All good stuff. Thanks so much, Mike, for your comments today and your insight. Sure this will be. I know this will be very valuable to our listeners.

Mike Petters

I'm glad to do it. Thanks for inviting me.

Rosanna Koppelman

That's our conversation with Mike Petters, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you, and your organization get to the next level with business and leadership development programs that specifically fit your needs. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education for you or your organization, visit our website at wmleadership.com. That's wmleadership.com. Thanks to our guest this week, Mike Petters, and thanks to you for joining us. Filling in for Ken White, I'm Rosanna Koppelman, Executive Director at the Center for Corporate Education. Until next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.