

62. Alan Stein, Jr. & Brian Levenson: Radical Performance

Alan Stein, Jr.: An NFL team loses two or three games in a row and the coach comes on in the post-game press conference and says something to the effect of, “On Monday's practice we're gonna get back to the basics.” Because they believe that the solution to their problem is going back to the basics, which then leads the question. Why did you ever leave them in the first place?

Kendall Lott: Never underestimate the importance of the basics. That includes things like team building or risk analysis, that are often overlooked in deference to time or the pressing needs of the moment. And *basics* doesn't necessarily mean easy.

Brian Levenson: The mindset for preparation is actually different than the mindset for performance. You need to be asking “Why?” and be humble and be experimental in preparation. And when I'm performing and the lights are on, yeah, I need to affirm myself. I need to be kind of fixed, like I am ready to go. I did put in the work. A little bit of arrogance, like, inner arrogance.

KL: Keeping your project management chops in form requires constant attention to the fundamentals – balancing openness, the preparedness mindset, with focus, the performance mindset. You're never finished learning, and refining. But when it comes time to perform, or lead your team, you need to do so with a certain confidence. The Performance Mindset demands that you lead with pride, pride in your team and in your ability to lead them.

The tools we use to form a successful, highly competitive sports team can also be effective beyond the athletic arena. Corporations, organizations, project managers and project teams, can benefit from incorporating sports-style training and philosophy into daily practice.

In this episode, we cover the preparation, mind versus the performance mind, the three pillars to building a good team, and vertical and horizontal accountability. Drivers of performance discussed here are well understood by professional athletic teams and like them, project teams need to be able to use the drivers to adapt and respond quickly to unexpected changes and obstacles.

The consummate technique to radical performance: practicing performance moments. It's the key to being ready when the whistle blows and the clock starts.

Announcer: From the studios of Final Milestone Productions overlooking the White House in downtown Washington, DC. This is PM Point of View, the podcast that looks at project management from all the angles. Here is your host, Kendall Lott.

KL: To discuss the parallels of sports and project management. I sat down with Alan Stein Jr. and Brian Levenson, who straddle the worlds of sports and corporate executive coaching. Both have worked closely with NBA players and teams, and are now focused on sharing their experience with the corporate world.

I'll kick it off by letting them fill you in on their backgrounds. Take it away Alan.

AS: Alan Stein, Jr., a very amicably divorced 43-year-old father of three. Spent most of my career as a basketball performance coach. So, helping players improve their athleticism, mind-body connection, bullet-proof their bodies against injury. And then a couple years ago, decided to take all of the lessons that I had learned through the game of basketball and apply those to other audiences, which is primarily now the business world and corporate audiences, and teaching folks how to improve their performance in everything that they do.

KL: Okay, excellent, thank you. And Brian.

BL: My name is Brian Levenson, based in Bethesda, MD, which is where we're recording this episode. I work as a mental performance coach, and my background is in sports psychology, so for the last eight years have been working with the lead athletes and teams on the mental side of performance. And then I also have a background in executive coaching and executive leadership so I love coaching elite performers whether they are involved at the C-suite level in the corporate game or athletes and coaches in the sports world. So I love unlocking, and helping them unlock their potential, unlock possibilities and, ultimately, we're in the game of how do we get them to enjoy their success.

KL: So with only two people in the room, I'm still sitting here with bloggers, podcasters, authors... But I've already heard of gym that didn't appear on the tape. We were talking about the difference between being an author and speaker and the comment was speaking is about being in the moment, adapting and having presence. And as soon as you said that about speakers, I realized that's probably what you would say about athletic performance and probably about management and team performance generally. The white collar professionals, the project manager, the issue is about being in the moment of being ready to adapt. And being present.

So let me take back to what connected me with you guys, that was different. There's a lot of people who speak on leadership, and there's a lot of different ways to look at it. I was struck by both your credentials and experience, which you talk to, both of you, each of you, the understanding of what it takes to do high level, indeed radical performance, to really break as far as you can go with what you have in a physical atmosphere, and then walking that into the business and the workplace, the non-physical, if you will, right? So I want to talk a little bit and break some of that down. What is the quality of performance, if somebody has performed well what are those characteristics?

AS: I think when most people hear the word performance they usually relegate it to sports to the arts, to music, where things, where people are actually performing. Where that's the vernacular that we use, and I want people to realize that we perform in every single aspect of our lives. We perform as mothers and fathers as husbands and wives... We perform in our community, we perform as podcast hosts as bloggers, as authors we perform in everything that we do, and there's a very direct correlation between our performance and how we view ourselves, our confidence, our self-worth, our self-value. So the reason I'm such an advocate for folks improving performance, is when performance goes up, through demonstrated performance, our confidence in our self-value and the way we feel about ourselves also goes up.

KL: Virtuous cycle.

AS: Yes, and I believe that's the key to... And you can fill in the blank to whatever is important: Happiness, fulfillment, success, significance, influence...Anything that you covet is directly tied to how you view yourself and your own self-worth. And that is directly tied to performance. So it's not about winning and losing, it's not about making an extra million dollars in your business or getting an extra number of listeners for your podcast, it's about becoming the best that you're capable of because then you'll feel better about yourself, which will then unlock the key to whatever it is that you're chasing.

KL: So you just said something interesting about performance, strictly speaking. It's actually not about achieving some set of goals. It's not... You can't measure it by, "we therefore won." It's also not a verb in a sense, you're not describing it as a way of doing. It's almost a condition. You've achieved some level of being your best-ness at what you're trying to get after, and in fact it increases your confidence – virtuous cycle – and you're able to get the types of things that you are interested in: influence, happiness, fulfillment, success satisfaction, etcetera. So, that's a state of being, is what you're really trying to drive there.

AS: Yes.

KL: So, Bryan, how do you feel about that?

BL: Yeah...

KL: What's your take on a quality of performance?

BL: (07:27) I think actually performance is about judgment. I think you are being judged when you're performing. And so there is a outcome, there is a result, there is a judgment that comes with performing. But to Allen's point, I think a key to performance, and you were sort of asking what makes a great performer, is their ability to focus less on that judgment and more on their own processes or their own standards or expectations that they set for their self.

So a basketball player, a mother, a musician, an actor, they're all performing. But if I'm a parent, I'm not going to judge my performance on whether or not my son or daughter started crying or learned the lesson. I'm going to judge myself on, "Well, did I do the best I

could to give myself the best chance to succeed in that situation?” Same thing with an athlete. Like they're going to put everything they can forward, but sometimes they might not get the outcome that they want. So...but there is a judgment, there is a result, there is an outcome there, and I think that's why people... That's one of the reasons I'm drawn to sport in a lot of ways, is because yeah... There is an outcome there, but how many times have we seen someone who didn't win, but they put forth the best that they possibly could and they get a standing ovation? I've seen in athletes do that.

KL: (8:43) It's something interesting, what you've said here is about knowing...what you use the word covet...the quality that you're after yourself. Do people know what that is? Have you had to help focus people on selecting what they're actually after? I'm wondering if people are very, very clear about that, or they are sometimes chasing the wrong ball.

AS: I think that happens a lot, I do think and it's the first chapter of my book is self-awareness and unfortunately I think a lot of people lack true self-awareness, so they don't necessarily know what it is that they want. We have all these societal norms and things that are telling us what we're supposed to be after and what we're supposed to be chasing, but I don't know how many people can really process that internally. And I always think self-awareness is very similar to bad driving. Very few people admit that they're a bad driver, yet there's plenty of them out there.

I don't know that I've ever met someone that readily acknowledges that they're not self-aware, but I think a good portion of people that I meet aren't. And I don't say that from a place of judgment. Self-awareness is a process, it's not an end result. I am more self-aware today than I was a year ago and I would like to believe that if I keep doing the work, I'll be even more self-aware a year from now. But self-awareness is not something that you arrive at, it is always going to...it's like fitness.

You can't ever say, "I'm in shape," because then if you stop doing the things that you did to get in shape, you will no longer, be in shape. So self-awareness is also a process. But yeah, I don't know that a lot of people really know what it is that they're after. And in full transparency, I'm constantly trying to clarify that myself. I think I have a better direction of what my North Star in life is now than it has been in years past. But it will continue to change, and it will ebb flow just like everything else in my life.

BL: (10:29) And I would say, I think Simon Sinek's work on starting with "Why?" if you've seen his TED Talk or read his book, he does a really good job of how powerful it is to understand why you do what you do and being mission-oriented.

Having said that, to Alan's point, I've interviewed players at the NBA combine, NHL players who are going to be drafted, the MLS, Major League Soccer, and so many of them, when you ask them, "Why do you do what you do?" They say, "Well, I've always been good at it."

And so a lot of times they just do something that they've been good at, and I think a lot of times that happens with people outside of sports. They're good at math, so they go into Finance, and that's just what they're good at, and they might wake up when they're 45 and say, "Well why do I actually do what I do?"

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(11:10) And so, for athletes in particular, which both of us have interacted with, you see that. Where they become a professional, but they don't really know why they do what they do, and then that's why you sometimes you see guys quit. Because their mission isn't aligned with the work that they do. So, I think identifying a purpose and I trying to get clear on that mission from an early age is really powerful, and I think a lot of times people need to find clarity. So at least my work, when I go on on one with people, we're always trying to identify why they do what they do so they get clarity around that. And once they have clarity around that, they're much more mission-oriented and they're much more likely to follow through on a lot of the hard work and discipline and the non-sexy stuff that comes with being a professional athlete or an executive that has to work really hard. Neither of us would say that the people that we've interacted that are at the highest level didn't work they're ass off to get there.

So you know that hard work is important, but a lot of times we miss that sort of purpose, the mission, and why we do what we do and why they do what they do. To Alan's point, I'm always thinking about reworking my mission and just this last year, I reworked a mission that I had established seven years ago, so I'm always trying to recalibrate because life changes.

KL: (12:30) Let's talk about the drivers of performance. And both of you have had a take that preparedness matters. There's a...you're coming at it from slightly different places... But there are drivers to performance and, one step further, we know we can prepare for those. We can start working those things. So, let's run through that a little bit. What have you seen that translates into the business world that was a driver of performance? What do people need to be paying attention to, given that they have a goal? Alan?

AS: I come at everything from a very basic vantage point and that's... I don't say that to diminish myself. I'm a very simple guy and I live by just a handful of principles and convictions and, for me, everything always comes back to attitude and effort, because those are two things that we can control. Our effort in any moment in time is always going to be a choice.

(13:20) And what I've always found interesting is, most people acknowledge that working hard is a choice, when they work hard. But when you call them out for not giving their best, they tend to deflect to certain excuses...

KL: How the system was bad...

AS: Well, but just by default, if you think about it, there has to be another side to the coin. If working hard is a choice, then that means by default not working hard is also a choice. But most people don't own that half of it. And effort is a big part of being prepared.

KL: And you coach to that when you're talking to a business leader?

AS: Absolutely, yes. Effort is always a choice and it can be expressed in a variety of different ways. But you put forth effort in how effectively you communicate and get to know the people around you, you put effort into all of these different areas.

And then the next is attitude. It's funny, I giggle, because I say this to my three young kids, all the time. That you don't control what your brother does to you but you control how you react. And that's medicine all of us need to take, because 99% of what goes on in the world, we have no control over. But we all own how we will react and how we'll respond to whatever is coming our way, both the good and the bad. And your ability to take any situation whether it's something positive or it's an adversity or challenge, you have the keys to the car, and you choose whether or not to take that circumstance and use it in a way that serves you and move you forward. Or you can choose to use it in a way that cripples you and moves you back. But the choice is always yours. And part of being a performer is being open to feedback, and being able to take in all types of feedback and use whatever that feedback may be in a way that serves you and moves you forward.

So if you get some what we would consider positive feedback, then you use that to reinforce the way that you've been preparing and you use that to reinforce what you've been doing. If you get constructive feedback, that most people would consider negative, then you can choose to learn a lesson from it and pivot and course-correct and do something differently next time. So no matter what the world throws at you, you always choose how to use it. And if you put your focus into giving your best effort in everything you do, and focus then to taking all feedback and using it in a way that makes you better, you'll drive performance forward all of the time.

KL: I heard you refer to growth mindset before Brian...

BL: And that is a growth mindset.

KL: And you have to have feedback to do it...or typically, I've heard, that feedback is important for growth mindset. Right? That's the only way to get the...it is a way to get prodding and prompting to growth. Speak to that a little bit.

BL: (15:52) Yeah, so I'll back up one step and say what I Alan's talking about is controlling the controllables. And I had never heard that until I was about 25 years old, and in grad school. And I think sometimes when you're interested in "self-help," and you're reading books and you're watching TED talks, you sometimes forget, at least I do, that maybe a 21 year old hasn't heard of this stuff .

And so, the basics that Alan's talking about for your PMs...controlling what you can control sounds so basic, but it's so difficult. And I use that as a mantra in my life. I control what I can control. And I think as we get older, some of these mantras become clichés, and we think clichés are just not worth repeating. And it's one of the most basic, simple exercises I do, with my clients. It's what's in your control, what's out of your control, and let's list them.

And so I just want to make sure that we hammer that home. Because I think that is a big part of performance, is controlling what you can control, as it relates to growth mindset or performance and what makes a great performer. So the book Mindset by Carol Dweck is a fascinating book, a great read, and is one of the books I recommend when people ask me, "What's a book that you recommend?" Having said that, I have a framework that I'm leveraging for the book that I'm writing, which is the mindset for preparation is actually different than the mindset for performance.

So Alan was just talking about how you handle feedback and are you open to feedback? And in my opinion, you need to be asking, “Why?” and be humble and be experimental in preparation. When I’m watching a film. When I’m talking to my coaches. In business. Right? When you leave a meeting asking someone who might be above you, or below you, “Hey, what could I have done better?” Having that humility to have a growth mindset and always be learning and always wanting to get better, is really important.

And when I’m performing and the lights are on, yeah, I need to affirm myself. I need to be kind of fixed, like I am ready to go. I did put in the work. A little bit of arrogance, like, inner arrogance. Joe Gibbs, who was the head coach of the Washington Redskins for years and is a legendary coach not just in football, but also in NASCAR, talked about having an inner arrogance. And Steve Kerr talks about...he loves that Stephen Curry has this inner arrogance about him.

KL: (18:09) We need confidence with that? Literally, “with belief in yourself?”

BL: I think confidence is belief in myself, right? Cockiness is believing I’m better than others. I define arrogance as I’m important, I matter. And arrogance without humility can be toxic and can be hubris and can be awful, but if I’m humble in my preparation, I’ve earned the right to believe that I’m important. And that I matter when I step between the lines. And so I think there needs to be more discussion about this performance mindset. Because I believe often we’re telling people that they should just stay humble and stay hungry. But I see so many performers that stay humble and hungry when they’re performing, and they criticize themselves or they beat themselves up or they try to stay perfect, and it holds them back.

And I we talked about being present. I think being present is massive for performing. Like, can I come back to where my feet are? And I know that’s a phrase we use the two of us all the time. “Be where your feet are.”

KL: Hmm. That’s a sports trick. And I just was dealing with an acting class and they talk about it the same way. “Get your feet under you.”

BL: I think it actually comes from the Koran. Actually the origins of it might even... It comes from Koran. So the mystics...people way before us...talked about being present. This isn’t a new phenomenon, but if you follow athletes, or any performers. Beyoncé...a great actor...they talk about visualizing. And so, you have visualization in one end and being present in this other sense. And I actually think the preparation requires visualization, putting yourself in that space, and then shifting your mind to just being present.

(19:45) When I’m at the free throw line, I want to be present for that free throw, and take whatever performance...we just speak sport that’s the language I think both of us understand... but when I work with people and they’ve got a presentation at their business or a sales person making a sales call, their ability to stay present in that moment is massive. So I love this idea of shifting our mindset in preparation and actually this binary that exists between preparation mind and performance mind. And that’s why I’m writing a book because I actually think so many people bring their preparation mind into their

performance.

KL: And there's a wall there. When it's go time, you have to own it.

BL: You have to shift.

KL: Yeah.

AS: (20:24) It's important that we make sure that folks listening realize that just because something's basic, it doesn't mean that it's easy. People treat those things as synonyms. Almost everything he and I are speaking about right now is incredibly basic. Like on an intellectual level, I can explain this to my children and they understand it. Nothing that we're talking about right now is easy. There is nothing easy about being in the present moment in this digitally distracted world. And there's nothing easy about continually and consistently working on the basics because more times than not, the basics are boring, they're mundane, they're tedious. So to fall in love with that and to do them routinely at a high level is incredibly challenging. So just know that, although we deliver all of this content in a very a matter of fact tone, that's only because it's basic.

None of this stuff is easy. And I won't speak for Brian, but for me, the stuff we're talking about are the biggest challenges I face. Being present most moments of every day is the biggest challenge I personally face.

KL: And I'm taking this one of your first principles, if you will, some of the core principles for the best of the best that you've seen. How do you see this expressed? How do you see the failure in getting to basics in the business environment when you're talking with people who are entrepreneurs or business leaders or in the non-professional sports space, or as athletes, let's say? How do you see it as where it's not working? It's like, "Man I need to walk you back to the basic first."

AS: Well, yeah, it happens. It's not even just relegated to business. It's our human nature to want to skip steps. And I even remember as a kid, I would watch Michael Jordan do an amazing move in a game, and I would run out to my front yard and try to mimic that move. And I was disrespecting him. I was disrespecting the game. I was disrespecting his preparation, because I hadn't mastered all of the fundamentals that led up to him being able to perform that specific move. In order to perform an 18-foot fade away from the corner, there's a lot of other building blocks that have to be in place for you to be able to do that. And as a kid, I would basically skip those and try to go right to the sexy move and you can't do that. And Brian had mentioned Joe Gibbs in NFL... This happens inevitably every single season. An NFL team loses two or three games in a row, and the coach comes on in the post-game, press conference and says something to the effect of, "Monday's practice we're gonna get back to the basics." And that always makes me laugh, not because I think I'm a better leader or coach than an NFL coach, those guys are geniuses. But because they believe that the solution to their problem is going back to the basics. Which then leads the question, "Why did you ever leave them in the first place? Why are you not doing the basics every day? If you believe that's what solves your problem?"

(23:10) So, to me, the success of any leader in business is establishing what are your

basics...

KL: What are the basics?

AS: ... of your business or of your role, and making sure that you're doing those things every single day. I've never met Bill Belichick, and I don't have a dog in that race, but anything I've ever read about him or Nick Saban from Alabama, and I know this to be true with Coach K at Duke...they do the basics every single day, every single Alabama football practice, there is some blocking and some tackling going on. There's something that has to do with technique and with footwork, and same thing with Bill Belichick. And those are some of the most fundamentally sound athletes of their given sports that we've ever seen. It's because they never abandon the basics.

BL: It's amazing, because as you were talking I was thinking about a story involving Bill Belichick and then you named Bill Belichick. So there's an amazing story, if you remember, there is a corner back from the Patriots named Malcom Butler. And Malcom was an undrafted guy, I think a couple of years before he was with the Patriots, he was working at a cash...as a cashier at Popeyes, and Malcolm that year barely played. I think he joined them midway through the season, and they are studying and preparing for the Super Bowl against the Seattle Seahawks, and Malcolm at the time was like the fourth cornerback, the fifth cornerback. Not really expected to play a lot. And he's guarding a guy. They're running what they think Seattle is going to run when they're on like the three-yard line, and so they're going through it and they have this on video, to show him. And Malcolm's guarding a guy, and he takes the wrong path. He doesn't use the right footwork to stop that guy from getting to where he's going. And Bill Belichick stops, goes over there, corrects Malcom. And then he still does the mistake, and Bill criticizes him and critiques him and says, "You need to jump that route, you can't sit back on that." And so that's that, and the game's going on, and Malcolm's hardly playing, and the other corner back that's ahead of him, is getting roasted.

And so they put Malcolm in because he's a better fit to cover that wide receiver. And he starts doing a great job on this wide receiver. Starts earning time and... And so they leave them out there and they play him... Then there's this miraculous play on the sideline, where it goes off Malcom, and it ends up in a wide receivers lap on the sideline for Seattle, and Malcom gets burned, and he comes to the sideline and it's an unlucky play. It was out of his control, and his teammates just say, "It's okay. You did your job, don't worry about it, stay ready." They take him off, then they get back to that same goal line that they had practiced on the three-yard line, and they put Malcolm back in, and they run the same exact play that he had scouted for, and he jumps the route, intercepts it, becomes a Super Bowl MVP, a hero. And the reason why that happened was in large part because the coaching staff put him in that situation, prepared him for that situation. And then had the gravitas to put him out there and give him the opportunity, so that he could rely on his instincts.

But if they hadn't studied that; if they hadn't gone over that detail, he wouldn't have made that play.

KL: This the three-yard pass at the goal?

BL: Yeah.

KL: Okay, I watch exactly one football game a year, and I saw that play. And you're telling me that's the guy who missed that play a number of times before... But he was ready now because he prepared.

BL: He was ready. He hadn't done it right in their practice, but they had warned them, they had told him. And the other corner back is actually the hero, the coaching staff. Because the other corner back basically said they're running that play. I'm going to go inside. So he was a great teammate, he took out the inside guy and allowed Malcolm to come free.

KL: (26:36) Let's talk about that from a teamwork perspective.

AS: When I talk about what it takes to create an unbeatable team, there's three pillars that I focus on. One is role clarity.

KL: Oh yeah.

AS: Two is accountability. And then three is communication.

KL: I was wondering when we were going to get to accountability. And communication. You're saying words that sounds like project management already. So I didn't know this was a sports thing.

AS: I'll give you a couple of bullet points for each because they actually... It takes almost 30 minutes to dive into all three of those. But every team is like a jigsaw puzzle, and when you look at a jigsaw puzzle, which I do quite frequently on rainy and cold days here because I have three young kids, every piece matters. Like there's pieces of different sizes and shapes and different colors, but at the end of the day, if you want the full mosaic, if you want the full picture at the end, then every piece matters. And it's important that anyone on a team knows that their piece matters, regardless of what their role is, and that everyone else on the team has a strong respect and appreciation for everyone else's puzzle piece.

(27:31) So if you are the star player or you're the 15th man, there needs to be a two-way respect that both of you are important to the team. And in order to do that, every person on the team has to know their role, has to embrace their role, and then has to do everything they can to star in their role.

Brian's story was a perfect example of a fourth- or fifth-string cornerback, who still had the pride to embrace his role as a fourth- or fifth-stringer, because that's important, and he's part of the preparation, and it turned out that he ended up getting moved up the depth chart and ended up being the hero. But that only happens if you have a mutual admiration and respect and you treat your fifth-string, cornerback the same way you would treat Tom Brady, who's the star of the team. And that's one of the things that makes a group like the Patriots...

KL: Role clarity is what a leader needs to drive. But I'm hearing respect is what makes the

clarity meaningful. That you have a role and I have a role, and we both acknowledge what that is.

AS: But many times we take...talking about the basics...we take for granted that everyone on the team knows what their role is. Because we need to make sure that it's articulated and it's not just articulated for me to you. But Brian needs to know what your role is, and you need to know what his role is, and I need to make sure that we're all crystal clear on that. And the thing about roles that can be challenging is, your role is not always what you want it to be, it's what the team needs it to be, to be successful. I'm sure that Malcom did not want to be the fifth-string, cornerback, that was not his preference, but that's what the team needed. And Bill Belichick decided that's the role you'll play for us to be successful. And he chose to accept that, and to star in that, and have pride in that, and that's what makes a guy like him special and a team like the Patriots special.

KL: (29:17) What a commercial break? No. A podcast recommendation. "Biz Blast," with host Brian Wagner. (Remember him from the Scope of Success podcast?)

Biz Blast Radio is a fun motivational business podcast hosted by Brian and a roster of comic co-hosts. Listen to in-depth interviews and engaging business, life discussions with startups, business leaders and entrepreneurs, all while having some fun by playing games like the popular celebrity net worth game "What's My Worth?" Available on all podcast platforms. The show is presented by BusinessLifeLessons.com. Subscribe today!

Now...back to Radical Performance...

KL: (30:00) So sounds like the leadership side of this piece is not only knowing the skills and abilities of the people, their attitudes, their willingness to prepare, but literally, what roles are actually needed. I think that's something we bypass a lot in project management. There's a certain cookie cutter-ness to it. And there's a reason. Because we've learned a lot. So start with something. But I think knowing what the roles should be, and then making sure people fulfill them and are communicating...

AS: And then you want to make sure you get people in the right spot. Like in a perfect world, if this was our organization, I'd want to make sure there's as much alignment as possible between what Brian wants his role to be and what I need it to be. Because if it's only my needs and he's not getting any satisfaction, or enjoyment, that's not sustainable. So you want to put people in a position where they can do what they do well, and that should be part of the recruiting process.

(30:45) You should hire someone who, what they want to do, and what they do well, is also filling the need of your team. And when there's that type of marriage, now you've got something really...

KL: So it reaches back into design. Your three pillars. This one pushes back into design and then comes out as you noted, Brian, in the actual performance of the thing, when it actually happens, from role clarity and being ready. Talk about accountability.

AS: From an accountability standpoint, the first thing we have to do is shift our minds to

realize that holding someone accountable is something you do for them; it's not something you do to them. That holding someone accountable is a way that you show them that you care about them.

I want to make sure that Brian knows when I hold him to the highest standard possible it's because I care about him, I care about him as a human being and I care about our organization. And him choosing not to give his best effort, I'm going to hold him accountable to that, because I believe in him, and I want to see him be successful. So accountability is vital, and it's one of the missing ingredients, I think, for a lot of organizations... is the ability to not only have vertical accountability, which is what everyone has. "You two guys report to me, I hold you both accountable." But the best organizations also have horizontal accountability, which means you guys hold each other accountable. And even though I might be the highest one on the org chart, Brian still holds me accountable. Like if I'm the CEO and he's the office temp, and I show up late for a meeting, he has the right to hold me accountable for that. There is no hierarchy when it comes to standards. Everyone should be on the same playing field.

KL: (32:21) Let me ask you then Brian on that. From a sports psychology perspective, what's the scientific or academic discussion, if you will, around accountability? Because some people don't love accountability, they think it's overused. Talk to me about accountability from a sports psychologist perspective.

BL: You asked me the question I was actually thinking of asking myself as we were sitting here. There's something called self-determination theory, and self-determination theory suggests that autonomy, competence and relatedness is what drives human behavior.

And so, if you break that down, competence is what we talked about earlier. Like I'm good at it. I want to feel like I'm competent at this job and I'm good at it. And I add value. Relatedness is, a lot of what you guys were talking about. It's like what's my relationship with the organization, and how do I relate? One of the things I love talking about with my clients is pride. And I work with executives that often say, "I want my employees have pride in the work that they're doing, I want them to have ownership," and with that comes accountability.

So I once or with this college wrestler who told me in his opinion, the difference between confidence, cockiness, and pride is as follows. Confidence is I believe in myself. Cockiness, I believe I'm better than everybody else. And pride is I believe I'm part of something bigger than myself. And there's two sides of pride, right? I can be too proud to get help or to be coached or to be managed. But the other side of pride is like... Yeah, I really am part of something bigger than me. And I think any championship team that we've ever been involved with has a sense of pride, whether it's the name on the front or even the name on the back, like pride to wear my last name with a certain pride, or the community I'm from...

And then, autonomy is just empowering people to have the freedom to make decisions and to empower them to make great decisions. And humans want to have a sense of autonomy. Not everybody wants to be an entrepreneur and be making decisions on everything, but within their job and within their framework, for a project manager, a great

project manager is going to have to know when to give his guys or gals autonomy, they're going to have to have them feel like they're part of something bigger than themselves. And they also need to be good. They need to know how to do the job. If you're incompetent, but you have pride and you have autonomy, that can be a disaster. And so, I think Competence doesn't get enough credit in our world. We often talk about Confidence, and I think confidence really comes from self-determination – when I have competence, when I have some autonomy, and when I have some pride, true confidence can come to the forefront.

KL: I remember saying, “It ain't bragging if you done it.”

BL: I'm always looking for inspiration from leaders, because I think there's a lot to be learned from them, and I want to lead in my own way, and I'm always trying to look for principles. There's a great book Ray Dalio wrote called Principles. Ray Dalio ran the biggest hedge fund in the world. Everything he's doing is around principles. And there's an accountability, and there is radical transparency is what he talks about, being able to criticize each other, but not take it personally. And that's how we get better.

AS: Because you have to have that mindset that, if Brian is going to give me some constructive feedback, that he's doing it because he cares. He's not doing it to bust my chops. And that goes back to the accountability, as a gift that you give someone by holding them accountable, and I would consider giving someone constructive feedback a part of accountability. And one of the things that's important is, in organizations, that you confront behavior, you're not confronting people.

Like if Brian's exhibiting some behavior that's not conducive to our culture, he's constantly late, this has nothing to do with whether or not I like him or not. We can be best friends, but his behavior is not acceptable to what it is that we're trying to create. We have standards of excellence that we believe are required for us to be the best we can be. His behavior is contradicting that, and I'm going to hold him accountable, and I'm going to call him out for that behavior. And as human beings...

KL: Hate the sin not the sinner.

AS: Yes. And as human beings, it's tough to de-personalize that. It's hard to not take it as a personal attack. But we have to be able to do that.

(36:25) I would say, and I don't have any research to back this up, that almost every single dysfunction in an organization is within a couple degrees of communication. Or in many cases, miscommunication. The communication is that vital, and the most important part of communication is listening. I think the ability to actively listen is one of the basic components that every leader and every project manager has to work on mastering, because listening is where the gold is. And yes, you have plenty of things to share, and you have things that you can mentor and things that you can teach, but in order for it to be the right fit, you have to be asking the right questions to find out if it's the right fit.

BL: I would say even underneath communication, and something we haven't hit on, is getting the right people on the bus. And something we were talking about before we turned

on the mics was, Jon Gordon wrote this great book called The Energy Bus, which is awesome, for organizations inside and out of sport. And taking the time to make sure you have the right people, that match your principles or your values or your culture, is something that a lot of organizations don't do. They often go toward the technical or the talent, or the IQ. We were talking about EQ earlier. We often don't screen for those types of qualities.

There are different types of cultures, and it's not to say that one's right and one's wrong, they're just different and they go about it differently. So I love this idea of who are we getting on the bus? Does it match our principles? Does it match our values? Let's take time. I just literally right where you are sitting... I was working with an executive yesterday, and he was interested in partnering with somebody, and he said something brilliant. He said, "I want to find a partner that one, as in one is me, plus that person, one other person, equals three."

And when we unpack that, what he was saying is one plus one equals three, not one plus one equals two. And what he was saying was, "I want to find a partner that's a great teammate, that makes me better. So maybe it's not one, it's actually one and a half." And I think when people hire or they partner, they're often just looking for what strengths does that person have that complement my weaknesses, or finding someone exactly like me, and just replicates my job.

(38:37) But if you can look for someone who complements your weaknesses *and* has elements of you, and can actually make one plus one equals three, rather than one plus one equals two, you're able to open up positive lines of communication, you're able to really go into the weeds on accountability and all the stuff we're talking about, because they're the right fit.

KL: Back in the day, it seems like the idea of a fit was find something that's common. People that can fit with you meant common. And then we heard, as entrepreneurial work became even more and more highlighted in the digital age, hearing people say, you hire for your weakness, hire for the thing you can't do, because that's what you've got to do to build up the whole, right?

You just pushed it to a third level: Hire for enhancement. There is some commonality. There is some fit for weak. But the enhancement is that blend, and a willingness to be open and pushed. So one plus one can equal three.

BL: (39:27) At my core, I'm a blender. So you used the word blend. How do we enhance? I think enhancement occurs when you blend ideas, you blend concepts. I think the world is just so complex and polarities and binaries and paradoxes...I think the more that you go into those in more than you realize that *And* is more powerful than *Or*. And so that, to me, I think you hit the nail on the head: Enhancement occurs when we can find *And*. That's why I think diversity is important. I think diversity is an *And* item, it's a blender. It just opens up possibilities in different ways.

AS: There has to be alignment between what you want and then what you're actually using to hire. And what, Brian just brought up perfectly is, a lot of groups hire on technical skills,

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they hire based on what's on the resume. But if you ask your project managers right now, write down the top 20 characteristics of a direct report or of an employee, or whatever terminology they use, write down the top 20 characteristics and they'll start writing them out and then tell them to circle the ones that have to do with technical ability or IQ. And at most, it's two or three. It's 16 or 17 things that have more to do with EQ. They have to do with ambition, they have to do with being selfless, they have to do with self-awareness.

(40:40) So we know intuitively that we want people that have a high EQ, that can do all of these things, and yet, we make our hiring decision based off the very small percentage of tactical and technical stuff on the IQ side. So it's disjointed. There's not an alignment between what we're using as our criteria and what we actually want, and that's a major problem. And the cool part is you could actually reverse this. Go to a room full of employees and say, I want you to list the qualities of the best boss that you've ever had. 90% of everything that comes out of their mouth will be EQ-related. Yes, you want someone that's knowledgeable and competent. There's no question. That's just the ante for sitting at the table. But after that, every quality you want in someone that you work for, with, or you supervise, is going to be on the EQ side.

KL: Then I would also, based on which you said, have people say... "So which of those characteristics you said you wanted that were on the EQ side, for example, are the things you want because you're comfortable with them or things you want because they're not you?" Like force that likeness versus weakness, and see what the blend is there, because you might want something in between the two. It's an interesting exercise to probably run.

AS: (41:42) And before I move on, there was one other thing I wanted to say on communication, and that's: People have to understand, especially project managers, you are always communicating something, even when you don't think you're communicating you're communicating. And this is not even just the non-verbals that we talk about, body language and facial expressions, but a perfect example that I think will be appropriate for project managers: when you delegate something to someone else, you send a very powerful unconscious message that I trust you, I believe in you and I know you're competent enough to do this as well, as I could. That's why I'm going to delegate it to you. When you micro-manage someone, you send the exact opposite unconscious message. I don't believe in you, I don't trust you, you're such a bone-head there's no way you'll get this done, unless I'm standing over you figuratively or literally, and that sends the opposite message.

And I'm a big believer that every single human interaction we have, whether it's 30 seconds with a stranger in an elevator, or two colleagues that have worked together for 20 years, every time we interact with a human being, we are either strengthening a human connection or we're eroding it. Those are the only two things we're doing. We're either making a connection stronger, or we're making it worse. And when you delegate something, you're unconsciously strengthening a connection with your teammate. When you are micromanaging you're unconsciously eroding it. And we have to be so conscious of all of these messages we're sending out.

I used to be a micro manager myself, because I'm somewhat of a perfectionist, until I realized that giving them the autonomy to do it on their own is the best gift that I can give

them. And they're going to make mistakes, just like I made mistakes and continue to make mistakes. But that autonomy, the subconscious message you give when you allow someone to do some autonomous work is incredibly powerful.

KL: It sounds like you're talking about the application of the self-determination theory. And it's really applied here in this case. I like that push-and-pull; all the interactions are either going to be strengthening, some variation of strengthening, or weakening them, whatever is actually going on in the content of the interaction...

AS: And when you put it through that filter, then you realize that every interaction matters.

KL: Yeah.

AS: Like I'm on elevator with you. And we're strangers for 30 seconds. I'm going to smile or I'm going to say "Good morning," because that's about all I can do to strengthen a human interaction with a stranger in 30 seconds. But if you look at everything as either a deposit or withdrawal, my goal is to make as many deposits in the human beings around me, as possible.

KL: (44:09) Whatever we're getting done, we want to be able to do it better and better, I believe is what we're after here. And I heard something interesting on another podcast recently, about athletes. I also saw, something that you had been writing on, which is: One of the things that really differentiates the best of the best of the best, among them, when they hit the play just right, is the regular ability to be self-aware, self-critical, like self-monitoring what's going on and adaptive. With one more comment: when under pressure. It's like that person is literally monitoring every piece of pro-perception they're in. Where they are in space, and will adapt, and just be constantly ready to adapt under pressure.

How do you see this ability to adapt? We would assume that's good, but what can we do to focus on that or to improve our ability to be adaptable, not in a career choice but at the moment of a relationship, taking or giving. Or of hitting a performance, achieving something we're after?

BL: (45:13) I think our society, specifically in the West, there's been this obsession with *becoming*. Become more. Even growth mindset – become more, keep getting better, keep getting better. And one of the things I'm wrestling with right now is, when does *becoming* get in the way of *being*? And when does *being* get in the way of *becoming*? A Buddhist monk living in India or Cambodia...they're *being* a lot, but are they *becoming*? It's an interesting question. And what do you want as an individual?

KL: They don't pay us for that.

BL: But we do get paid for becoming more. Like we get promoted. If we're achievement-based, and our society is very achievement-based, so I'm constantly wrestling for myself in trying to be intentional about giving myself space to *be*, while also encouraging myself to *become*.

KL: Perhaps having some restful state is even valuable for all of us. This sense of

understanding of being might be more valuable for us than the constant performance-tweaking in a certain sense.

BL: I'll kick it over to you. So yes, your question was about pressure and it was... How do I perform when the lights are on? And so my framework is, we have this mindset for preparation we have this mindset for performance. Then we need to practice performance moments. And so we get into that performance mindset more often, and if we practice performance, we'll give ourselves more reps in that space. It doesn't mean you get rid of the preparation mind and you don't get rid of the meticulous stuff, but you need both. You need the preparation mindset *and* the practicing performance mindset. So that's my framework.

Coming back to what you're talking about...idleness, boredom, is where a lot of genius occurs. Albert Einstein used to go on long walks. You know, Edison used to go fishing without actually trying to fish and just give them self-space to be... So, there's value in idleness and there's value in discomfort, there's value in pushing limits and making ourselves uncomfortable. So I believe you need to both have tension because tension allows growth and allows you to *become* more, and the space to also *be* so that you can allow your inner genius to come out. So I believe in all of it. The challenge for all of us is 24 hours in a day, although everybody in the world has the same amount of time. So it's just about trying to create habits or routines or priorities to make sure that you are having all of this occur. And it's one of the big things I struggle with. I don't have it mastered. I'm still trying to figure out how to maximize, while also being wise.

KL: (47:50) Practice performance moments, there's our jewel for today.

AS: If you talk about lead performers, they're not only practicing being present when they're performing, they're practicing being present 24 hours a day. It's something you condition yourself to do. The same thing with being uncomfortable. You can raise your tolerance for discomfort if you consistently put yourselves in positions with intention, to be uncomfortable, mentally, physically, emotionally. One of the things I do in my workshops is I get folks to list...just list five activities that refill your bucket and recharge your battery. Five things that get you excited, five things that get your creative juices flowing, that energize you. And I get people to write those down and then I ask them to write down what a typical day looks like, and then ask them to compare those two notes. And more times than not they're like, "Man, I'm not doing none of this stuff."

KL: I love it. Then why aren't you doing it?

AS: Yes, and that's the key. So then it goes back to as we all do, have the same 24 hour block. The reason the most high performers and high-achievers do more than the rest of the people is they make more of that 24 hours. They're more intentional with that time, and that's what I encourage folks to do. If you know these five things fill your bucket and recharge your battery then you need to make time to start integrating these things in.

And I'm a big believer that you show me your calendar, you'll show me your priorities. And for the most part, most people, their day is so chaotic that you have to make the time on the book ends of your day which means your morning and evening routines is your best time to try to integrate these things in. I mean the first 30 minutes of every day, I'm doing a

little bit of meditation a little bit of breath work, a little bit of physical exercise. I even throw in a cold shower, just to prime me for the rest of the day, because I know that the rest of the day is going to have so many things thrown at me, I'm probably not going to make time for it later. So for me, that's a very conscious choice to do those things. And if these are the things that are required to perform at a high level and performing at a high level is required for the self-satisfaction and confidence of being truly happy, then what could be possibly more important than making time for these things?

Most people will say they're family first. If you say, "Are you family first?" They all raise their hand. And then you say, "Alright, well, open up your day planner. How come all I see are meetings and phone calls and appointments? I don't see little Timmy's T-ball game, I don't see little Julie's dance recital, I don't see a date night with the wife. I don't see any of these things on the schedule." That's because you put all of the work stuff first and then you give your family the scraps which I did for the longest time.

Well, that's fine if that's how you want to live your life. There's nothing wrong with that, but don't go around telling people you're family first, because you're not.

KL: In what sense are good leaders – versus being good as members of a team – different? One could just be the role... But separate from role... Is there a meaningful (And in what way is it meaningful?) distinction, when someone is a leader versus a team member, a manager versus a team leader? And the reason I want to go there is...I'm trying to be...this is not a rhetorical question...project managers coordinate the efforts or even direct the efforts, according to variation, of others. But they're often also team members, or have been, or will be, on the next project in some role.

So what is the difference, if any, and why is it meaningful?

AS: I would say vision. Vision might be the one that's required of the leader. I don't ever believe any organization should have a "The Leader." A group of leaders.

KL: Let's think of it as coach versus team.

AS: Yeah, I think vision. I think the coach needs to be able to see what the team can become before they even realize that they have the capabilities of becoming that. That's not a requirement of the team. They have to have belief in the coach that their vision is something that they're capable of, and they're going to work towards. But that was, when you were framing it that way, that was the one thing that jumped out. Because most of it there's a parallel...almost all of it. You want teammates and leaders to have the same qualities. So for me, the big difference, I would say vision.

KL: Okay.

BL: (51:53) I'm going to answer it differently and it might not answer your question, but I think there's a misconception that a great performer is a great leader. I don't think that's necessarily true. And I think it happens in the corporate world, probably more than even the sport world, where the guy is the guy or gal is an amazing performer. And now they're expected to be a manager. And what they were great at might have been the execution of

the job. It doesn't say anything about them being able to manage other people.

And we see it in sports, where a great athlete will then get a head coach job and they don't know how to...

AS: Michael Jordan.

BL: ...How to manage.

AS: Michael Jordan might be the best example of all time. Arguably the best performer in the history of the NBA, maybe not the best owner, general manager, leader in charge of an organization.

KL: So given that we all want to be high performers, and you can be told "You're the leader now." And so you saw how the accident can happen, where it may not be the best fit. So what is the difference in the two? When I'm in that leadership role, is there anything meaningfully different that I need to pay attention to and be different in?

BL: So, I think greatness in general is when you make others better. So, I think greatness is when you make other people better, and therefore are a leader. But you can be really good at your craft without necessarily making other people better. And so just because I'm good at my craft, doesn't mean I'm a great teammate. And I've worked with teams that have a really good athlete, and that person would not be a great leader, therefore would not be a great coach or a great manager.

And so a good performer...I could list all of the performance mindset and preparation mindset qualities. Some of them involve being a great teammate, but not all of them, so they can check a lot of boxes of being a good performer. I do believe to go to the next level of greatness at least in a team component, it's about making others better.

(53:46) So I think there can be a disconnect between a good performer and a great leader or manager. And I think some people...there's nothing wrong! If you want to be a good performer, and that's what you want to do, you want to stay in your lane... Like I talked to somebody recently, who works for a big company, and they said, "This person brings in 7 million dollars a year. \$7 million to the company; the average person at that job brings in two. But that person would not necessarily be a great manager.

(54:14) And so I think having the self-awareness to also know what your priorities are...and like I have immense respect for the person who says, "You know what? I'm going to stay in my job. I'm going to make a lot of money. I'm going to live in this location, because it's a great location. And that's what I want to do with my life." More power to you.

KL: So the difference...vision...common characteristics of both turns out...except possibly this variation on vision and variation on enabling others...Leaders have to be able to do that.

KL: (54:46) Brian, go ahead and tell us what are you writing and how can people hear some of what you've been talking about. Or learn about that.

BL: So to my right is my studio, which is a table and a couple of microphones. It's nothing too fancy, but the podcast is called "Intentional Performers." I launched it about two years ago, and since have done over 100 episodes, including Alan Stein Junior. And yeah, the podcast aims to figure out how people set their mind, learn about their journey, find out what they're doing to be mentally strong.

KL: Are you out speaking at all?

BL: I do, I do keynotes, workshops, for both corporate and the sports world. And then, writing-wise, yeah, I'm in year three of writing a book. It's been a journey for me, but I think I'm like three quarters done with the rough draft of it. I know there's multiple iterations. I actually hired a coach to help me with that process.

KL: (55:44) Okay, so where is the one place they need to hear more from you?

BL: Yeah, I'm a big Twitter guy. I know Alan's an even bigger Twitter guy. But I'm at Brian Levenson on Twitter, and then my website is blevenson.com. And yeah, those are probably the two places you can find me.

KL: And a new author book out in January, tell us about it Alan.

AS: Yeah, it's called Raise Your Game: High Performance Secrets from the Best of the Best. And as I mentioned earlier, in my years working as a basketball performance coach, I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to work with some high level players and some high level coaches, all of which taught me a tremendous amount about leadership, and team cohesion and accountability, and respect and culture.

So the books really taking everything I learned through the game and showing folks how to apply that to their lives and their businesses.

KL: (56:33) Performance, the Best of the Best. Where am I going to find out about it, as a business guy?

AS: RaiseYourGameBook.com and AlanSteinJr.com.

KL: You're available for corporate events too?

AS: Yeah, I would say by trade, I'm a professional speaker, that's what I do now. And then I do keynotes and workshops and trainings.

KL: So, PMs... You didn't expect relationship advice did you? Well, not that kind of relationship... But for me, the concept that every interaction is strengthening or eroding a relationship is weighty and thought-provoking.

It may not be easy to stick to the principles outlined here, but the results and rewards are absolutely worth the pain. Keep a growth mindset. It's human nature to skip steps, but if you want to get to a higher level, you've got to keep drilling and refining the basics. And

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who knew that falling in love with the tedious was important? I guess it's time to go look at that activities breakdown one more time, with joy. Hire for enhancement so that one plus one will get you three. And remember: accountability is a good thing. Holding your colleagues accountable is doing something *for* them, not *against* them. Everyone on the team needs to understand their role and embrace that role. It might not be your dream position, but if it's what the team requires, it's what's needed. And ultimately, it's all about the team.

Special thanks to my guests Alan Stein, Junior and Brian Levenson.

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Be sure to stay subscribed for next month's episode, when our round table of Digital Project Managers tells us about Project Management in a Digital World.

Brett Harned: There was a point in time like five or six years ago, where there was nothing out there for people like us.

Abby Fretz: Any kind of new AI or augmented reality, we have to learn what that new technology implies for our process and for the products that we're building.

Patrice Embry: As things progress, you might realize that you need to change course a little bit. Agile doesn't always give you that opportunity, so you kind of have to wing it.

KL: What do you think about that?

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