

## Transcript: [The Secret to Great Leadership - From a Chick-fil-A Executive | Part One](#)

### **Melody King: 00:00**

Everything rises and falls on leadership. The ability to lead well is fueled by living your cause and purpose. This podcast will equip you with the tools to do just that. Live and lead with cause and purpose. And now, author of the book *The Anatomy of Leadership*, and our host, Chris Comeaux.

### **Chris Comeaux: 00:22**

Hello and welcome. I'm excited today on our podcast. We have Mark Miller. Mark's a business leader, a Wall Street Journal and international best-selling author, communicator, and co-founder of *Lead Every Day*. Mark, so good to have you. Welcome.

### **Mark Miller: 00:36**

Well, thanks for the opportunity. Great to see you.

### **Chris Comeaux: 00:39**

Yeah, this has been a long time in planning. We had Randy, your partner, last year, and he told me about you. And I said, I'd love to get Mark. And, you know, my family loves Chick-fil-A. So there's a multitude of reasons. You're a great guy, but your connections to Chick-fil-A in the past. So let me introduce you a little bit better to our hospice and powder care audience. And of course, we have leaders beyond that. And a lot of them know what Chick-fil-A is, but they may not know about Mark Miller. So Mark joined Chick-fil-A as an hourly team member in 1977. That's super cool. After a short stint in the restaurant, he joined the Chick-fil-A corporate staff. And over the next four decades plus, he provided leadership across the organization, including corporate communications, training and development, quality and customer satisfaction, organizational effectiveness, and more. He retired as the VP of high-performance leadership. Then Mark began his writing career more than 20 years ago when he partnered with Kim Blanchard, another hero of mine. One of the very first leadership books I ever read is this book by Kim Blanchard, co-author of the *One Minute Manager*. And together they wrote *The Secret, What Great Leaders Know and Do*. Today, 13 titles later, his books have been translated in 32 languages, selling more than 1.5 million copies worldwide. That's incredible, Mark. Through his writing and speaking, a direct engagement with leaders across dozens of countries, Mark has built a reputation as a trusted voice who makes leadership both approachable and actionable for leaders at all levels. Today, through *Lead Every Day*, Mark continues his lifelong passion of developing leaders, and he's on a mission to serve 100 million leaders. Mark is also an avid photographer and adventurer who loves going to hard-to-reach places. His travels have taken him to the jungles of Rwanda, Everest Base Camp, Easter Island, and across Drake's Passage to Antarctica, and more expeditions are in the works. Man, I just want to hang out and have a beer with you, Mark. Mark's been married to his high school sweetheart, Donna, for over 40 years. He has two sons, a daughter-in-law, and three grandchildren. So again, it's so good to have you, Mark.

### **Mark Miller: 02:40**

Thank you. Thank you.

### **Chris Comeaux: 02:42**

So,

### **Chris Comeaux: 02:42**

Mark, I love asking this question. What's your superpower?

**Mark Miller: 02:46**

Well, my superpower is the same as yours. And it's the power to choose. We get to choose where we invest our time, our energy, our resources. We get to choose whether we're going to take the path of growth or decay. We get to decide what our legacy is going to be. We get to choose who we're going to mentor. We get to choose what organizations and causes we're going to support. We get to choose what we're going to stop doing. And that list goes on and on and on and on. And um on good days, I choose wisely.

**Chris Comeaux: 03:20**

That is that is the coolest answer I think I've gotten to that question so far. Um, so my mentor, I think I shared with you the first time you and I met was a guy named Dr. Lee Thayer. And one of his core stratagems he was teaching he would teach is that everything is done by choice, which sounds so commonsensical, but I think we live at a time where literally people cannot choose. They could work 80 hours a week and not make one choice, just react to stuff. So that just feels profound. Um, would you have said the same thing 20 years ago? Is that always been a superpower or more of a hone power?

**Mark Miller: 03:58**

I think it's been a progressive revelation for me, uh, in part because I realize when I either don't choose or choose poorly, I'm forfeiting my agency. And I think I think that's a very precious gift to be stewarded. Um, and that's what I try to do every day. Somebody asked me just last week, I was on a podcast, as I recall, and they said, What's the question that you ask yourself most often? Which I love that question. And I said, I think, I think the question I ask most often is what's the highest and best use of my time? Wow. Which is again, only one of those choices that we have uh before us. But time is a leader's currency. I mean, where we put our time and energy is where things typically happen. And so um I I just get up every day trying to make good choices.

**Chris Comeaux: 04:59**

Man, I didn't know you were gonna say that. So let me ask a follow-up question. Do you have any tactical morning tactics or evening tactics? Like one in the evening I've just recently adopted, and it feels so profound. I wish I'd have adopted it 20, 25 years ago, is kind of a gratitude journal before I go to bed. But it's like reinforcing the choices I've made throughout the day. And I didn't even think about it from that perspective until you just said it. Anything, any tactics like that, the bookends of a day that you utilize?

**Mark Miller: 05:30**

You know, not really, uh, people have asked me before a version of that. Are you a morning person or a night owl? And I said, I'm pretty good around lunch. And so I'm not I'm not much on breakfast or evening routines. But during the day, the question I ask more than any other, clearly hands down. During the day, I'm asking myself, specifically, what am I trying to accomplish? Or if I'm in a group setting, specifically, what are we trying to accomplish? Because I think that that helps me maintain a strategic orientation. Again, I'm as guilty as the next guy. I will confuse activity for accomplishment in a heartbeat, in a heartbeat. And so if you're anchored to some desired outcome, if you're anchored to some objective, it actually helps me answer the bigger question how and where should I steward my time? And so in tandem, though those two, those are my two go-to questions.

**Chris Comeaux: 06:30**

Dang. Man, the first five minutes you're already like just masterclass. Well, before we dive into the books, because again, I was really looking forward to having you, because the whole Chick-fil-A connection, I'm a

huge fan of it. Um, Chad Tidd, who's a credible leader in the Western North Carolina area. I was a keynote for their chamber and got to know him and just an incredible leader. So for multitude of reasons, looking forward to today. But if I didn't ask you this question, some people would be mad at me, but go for it.

**Mark Miller: 06:58**

Well, I was gonna say the next time you see Chad, give him a hug for me. Tell him I said hello.

**Chris Comeaux: 07:02**

I will definitely, I will definitely do that. He's the type of dude you definitely want to hug. He's just got that incredible energy and just a great leader in that Mountain Erie, North Carolina region.

**Chris Comeaux: 07:11**

So, what's your favorite Truett Cathy story before we jump into your books?

**Mark Miller: 07:16**

Well, yeah, that that's actually maybe the hardest question uh that I'll have today because there's so many stories. I had the privilege to work with Truett Cathy for decades. And uh it was a real gift. But if I had to tell one, which I think will help advance uh my backstory just a little bit, you mentioned in the uh opening that I worked for a short season in a restaurant, and that is true. Let me let me go ahead and give you the rest of that story. Uh, I was awful in the restaurant. Awful, awful. I felt like every day was going to be my last day. So I made what I called a strategic career decision. Now I'm really quick to say this is not advice. I quit because I thought it would be better to leave Chick-fil-A than have to explain the rest of my life why I got fired from Chick-fil-A. So I went and got another job. Now remember, this is almost 50 years ago. I'm a I'm a kid at the time, but I needed to work, so I went and got another job. And six months later I got laid off. And I thought, you know, I really can't do what they do in the restaurant. I tried. I'm just not good with my hands, and I'm not fast enough. You got to work pretty quick in a Chick-fil-A restaurant. And so I struck out on both fronts and I said, but maybe I could work at the corporate headquarters. Now, for your listeners, I know that makes no sense in any universe, but just let's just chalk it up to the mind of a child. This was a long time ago. So I went to the corporate headquarters, I walked in, I told the receptionist I wanted a job working in their warehouse because I knew they had a warehouse. And she told me to have a seat, which I thought was a great sign. She didn't call security. And I later learned they didn't have security, but nonetheless, I'm seated in the waiting room, and just a few minutes later, Truett Cathy comes out, introduces himself, and takes me into his office to conduct this interview. Now, I'm just kind of blown away because I know who he is, and I'm thinking, why is he interviewing a kid to work in the warehouse? Well, what I didn't know that day, that I later learned, he only had 15 employees, the whole staff. And so when you've only got 15 employees, it makes a lot more sense for the head man or the head woman to be conducting those interviews. And looking back on that, I tell people I think it was a combination of God's grace and lack of discernment on Truett's part that he gave me a job working in his warehouse. And as you said, that was in 1978. And um, I worked, I had the privilege to work all over the organization over the 45 years or so that followed. And in several of those opportunities, I got to start something. And I don't think it had much to do, if anything, with my talent or skills, even. Um, it was let the kid do it, let the kid do it. And so I started our corporate communications group and I started our quality and customer satisfaction group and led in restaurant operations and led training and development, started the leadership development practice, started an organizational effectiveness practice, on and on and on. And um, it was it was a very, very fun ride for sure.

**Chris Comeaux: 10:30**

That's

**Chris Comeaux: 10:30**

such a cool story. Well, you obviously then spent many years working alongside him. What did people maybe misunderstand about Truett and what made his leadership so unique?

**Mark Miller: 10:41**

Well it's something that we actually write about in the book. Uh one of the fundamentals that we identified when Ken and I and our team, we were doing this work about 25 years ago, but I had observed this in Truett from the very beginning. He had the unique ability to value results and relationships. Now, I don't know if that sounds hard to some of uh the audience or not, but here's my experience. About 95% of the leaders I've met would say that's challenging. And the reason they would say it's challenging is because most of us have a natural bias. We either lean more toward results or we lean more toward relationships. Now, there are about 5%, and my standing joke is if you're one of that 5%, I don't even like you because leadership is easier for you, right? Because the best leaders value both. But there's a very small percentage, I think, that do that naturally. And Truett was one of those leaders. And he expected uh results at a high level, and he also loved people and loved building relationships with his people. But he, even though there was tension between the two, he could joyfully, readily, and daily embrace both. Really high standards, really high expectations, and he loved you with his life. I mean, he just loved people, the people that worked with him, people that didn't work with him. So he, it was results and relationships. And again, most of us have to work really hard to value both, to, to compensate for our bias. And uh, depending on how you engaged with Truett and his public persona, I would suggest was more of the loving father grandfather, which he was that to all of us, right? Uh, even asked him one day if he would adopt me, and he said no, I'd miss that window. Um so he was he was a very loving individual, and that is true, and that's predominantly, I would suggest, his public persona. But he was a really, really good businessman. I mean, it's a \$35 billion company today, and he built that. Uh, and so he had high expectations on uh results and relationships.

**Chris Comeaux: 13:01**

Wow. Well, this hopefully won't be the same answer. But obviously, I mean, people love Chick-fil-A for its chicken, but people from my vantage point love it for the culture and the leadership development. So, what did Truett do to build a strong leadership culture? I

**Chris Comeaux: 13:16** feel like I'm asking the right guy, considering you had, hey, let the kid do it.

**Mark Miller: 13:21**

Well, well, yeah, but let me say this that I would suggest this was maybe Truett's greatest contribution. Now, there'd be a lot of people that would debate that even within Chick-fil-A. And, you know, we we've never officially said here's Truett's greatest contribution. But here's what I think it was. He decided in 1967, when he built his first restaurant, that it was going to be an organization built on leadership. Now, let me defend that because you probably would never hear him say it exactly like that. But there's something unique about Chick-fil-A's business model, and some people have actually heard this before. Um, there is today only a \$10,000 uh fee, and five of it is refundable if you want to become a Chick-fil-A operator. And for decades it was only \$5,000 and it was totally refundable. And throughout history, if Truett found a great leader who didn't have \$5,000, he would loan it to them, right? Because he had this premise and he articulated it often in the early days. He said, you got to have two things to have a successful business. You got to have capital and management. And he said, if you require both of those things from an individual, the pool of people

gets really small because you need a really high net worth to afford to build the buildings and buy the equipment and lease the property and do all the stuff. He said, but if we provide the capital, the pool of men and women who have the capability, who today we would say have the leadership competence and capacity, that's a huge group. Because he wanted to remove any barrier of entry to put a strong leader in Chick-fil-A. And I would say today the restaurant operators are they are Chick-fil-A's competitive advantage. We got great food, we got good locations, and we got great uniforms and you know, good owner. Yeah, true, true, true, true, true. But we have great people because we have great operators. We execute well because we have great operators. Those leaders, so he knew from 19 before 1967 that we're gonna build this thing on leadership. And he's he and we have been reinforcing that for decades. Now, just a quick aside, we can chase this if you want. You mentioned my name in this whole thing. Truett, Truett figured this out when I was really just a kid, right? He was already pursuing that. But what happened in the early days, the volume and the complexity was low enough that a gifted leader could provide all the leadership capacity the business needed. What happened as the business began to grow? And this could be true for some of the folks listening to this, as the organization began to grow, that single leader, although still critical and essential, they couldn't provide all the leadership. And we came to the realization corporately that we needed more leaders on the corporate staff, and we felt like the operators needed more leaders in their restaurant because it it was beginning to outgrow their capacity to touch everything and make it happen. And you, and you, you know, and a lot of folks listening know you're really never going to outgrow your leadership. And so at one point, 25-ish years ago, things began to plateau, and we had to go to work to figure out how do we help accelerate leadership development, not because the operator was inadequate, but because he or she couldn't provide all the leadership that was necessary.

**Chris Comeaux: 17:02**

Oh, that's so good. Um, yeah, you're because our listeners, the vast majority are in this hospice in powdered care space. And I've self-admitted, um, so I was the my first Ime as a CEO was in my early 30s, and we grew like crazy. But now I can look through the rearview mirror. Any idiot could have grown because it was an area where there were a lot of retirees and a lot of older people. So I was just dumb lucky in the right place. And I think there are some people in the country that are very similar. We were just right people, right Ime. The demographic was in our favor. Now we're going into a season where that may be even truer because of the baby boomers, but it's going to come down to leadership. You know, there's all sorts of interesting debates. Um, unfortunately, there's some horrible fraud examples of hospice in the country, like the worst of the worst. Kind of like, you know, in your world picture, the worst fat food fast food restaurant would taint all of fast food. And then people think, well, all fast food is bad. We've got that going against us. But I've thought for a while that this is the Ime for leaders. We've had these amazing pioneers that created the hospice empowered care space. And I feel like, what will they say about us right now? Because it feels like there's an interesting crossroads for the entire field of hospice empowered care. And I, like you, believe everything rises and falls on leadership. And I think this is going to be an interesting study to go back 10 years from now and look back. And did the did the leaders replicate themselves, develop, which it feels like that's what you're saying happened to you guys.

**Mark Miller: 18:34**

Yeah, we needed, we needed to find a way to systematically, to routinely develop leaders. It had happened before, uh, before this kind of intervention, but the process, I'll put that in air quotes, the process prior to the year 2000, really, it was more immersion and osmosis. And at a certain scope, scale, and volume, that actually works. I learned a lot of leadership siding around a table with some world-class leaders, but there were 15 of us, 16 of us, and we had lunch at one table. Now I'm the guy that went and got lunch and brought it back, but we had lunch together. And in a lot of small organizations, that will suffice, but it it will

not scale. And that's where we were in 2000. We had tens of thousands of people who had never sat around a table with the kind of leaders I had the privilege to grow up with.

**Chris Comeaux: 19:30**

Well, I

**Chris Comeaux: 19:30**

have no idea if this is a good segue question, but you and Kim Blanchard wrote *The Secret* years ago, and now it's being released. Is it the fourth edition now? It is the fourth edition. So what were you what problem were you guys trying to solve with the book? Is it related to what we were just talking about?

**Mark Miller: 19:47**

Or it is. It is. So we needed more leaders. Now, I don't know how most people play this, but let me tell you my experience and Chick-fil-A's experience. When you have problems to solve and opportunities to seize, a very typical response is to put a leader on it. Now, he or she won't single-handedly solve the problem or seize the opportunity. What are they going to do? They're going to put a team together and they're going to cobble together the resources and they're going to provide the leadership necessary to solve the problem or seize the opportunity. So, uh, close to 30 years ago, we had problems and opportunities. And we looked over our shoulder at our leadership bench and we said, uh-oh. I hope she can lead in the future. I think she might be able to lead someday. We saw the operators struggling. Some of them were their sales profits and customer satisfaction were plateauing. We said, we think it's the same root problem that we need more leaders. We need more leadership capacity. And so, you know, what do you do in the short run? And a lot of you have been there. I've been there. When you don't have a leadership bench, you give those problems and opportunities to existing leaders. Or you live with the problem or miss the opportunity. We don't want to talk about that. But let's just say you give it to existing folks, which works fine for a while, but that's a dead end street, right? There's only so much your leaders can do before it begins to degrade the quality of the work and their quality of life and their engagement. You just don't want to go there. And I give full credit to our executive committee. They knew that was a dead end street. And so they asked me to figure out how do we accelerate leadership development. Again, I wasn't a kid then, but I had, I think I'd built the reputation. I'll work on hard stuff and I'll put a team of smart people together and we'll try to figure it out. And so we went to work to say, how do we accelerate leadership development? Our very first conclusion is we didn't have a common point of view. And my bet is a lot of folks listening to this or watching this don't have a common point of view. So if you say something about leadership, everybody in your organization is probably nodding, right? And they're all in agreement. Well, pass out a three by five card and ask everybody to write their definition of leadership. Now, unless you've done the hard work to forge a consensus, I'm going to say two things are going to happen. One, everybody can write something down. And number two, they're all going to be different. And so we said that's one reason we can't accelerate leadership development because they define it differently in operations than they do in accounting, and they define it differently than they do over here in marketing. The executive committee was divided on what leadership looked like and what leaders actually do. And so when I put this team of really smart people together, we said that's got to be the first thing we do is forge a consensus on what we want our leaders to do. And I point that out specifically because there are a lot of definitions of leadership that are that are academic, that are conceptual, that are philosophical. That's all fine. We said we need we need a behaviorally based, pragmatic point of view. We need to tell leaders what it is there to do. So we worked a couple of years on it. When people see what we came up with, they say, why'd it take so long? I said, Well, we were in the chicken business. Uh and you know, this was not something we had ever thought about. Plus, this was sort of a side hustle. We all had day jobs, but we worked on it a couple of years. And we we've come up with a point of view, and I'll never forget the day that we put it on a flip chart, and somebody said, What if it's not right?

Well, that just sucked all the wind out of the room because we didn't know if it was right or not. And so we began to brainstorm how could we build our confidence that that there's merit here, or uh identify anything we might have missed. Maybe it's even obvious to somebody that actually knows something about this topic. Now, I'll give the team credit. We had done global benchmarking, read a couple hundred books on leadership, interviewed. I mean, we had we had been diligent in the process, but we just we didn't have confidence that we had it right. And so I was going to be with Ken Blanchard the next day, and I said, You guys want me to run this by Ken? Now, some of your audience they don't know that name, but um 25 years ago, Ken had three um of his leadership books on the bestseller list at one time. And so I mean he for a long time he was sort of the authority in the leadership space. And again, I was fortunate enough to know him and uh to be friends with him. And so I said, Would you guys like me to share what we've come up with uh with Ken? And they said, Man, that'd be fantastic. And so I was with Ken and I said, Hey, I had a single page, five bullet points. I said, We're trying to accelerate leadership development. I'd love for you to take a look at this and tell us if you think we got it right, did we miss anything? Is this gonna stand the test of time? And he looked at it and he said, This has got to be a book. Well, I blew him off. I said, Ken, everything looks like a book to you, which is why he sold 25, 30 million books in his life. Literally, I mean, more than 25 million books. Incredible. I said, I said, Ken, thank you. I take it that you think that means this is like good enough to proceed. And he said, You were trying to identify what great leaders do at Chick-fil-A. He said, You've articulated what great leaders have done throughout history, and it has to be a book. And so again, one thing led to another. He persisted, and we released The Secret 22, 23 years ago.

**Chris Comeaux: 25:41**

Wow. Um I'm so I did when you and I first talked, I didn't get to share with you. But that's exactly why I wrote my book, The Anatomy of Leadership. It's the confluence of three things. But the first thing was one of my longtime team members came back and did an assessment of organization. And I thought it'd be cool because he had been away from organization. And I'm always reading and researching on leadership. And you know, the number one thing on that report, we didn't have a common definition of leadership. And I'm thinking, oh my God, I'm a total failure. If there's any one any organization should have had it, it should have been mine. But that really started my journey to then write the Anatomy of Leadership. And it's so interesting. Um, just this past weekend, I read the early copy. By the time the podcast is coming out, the book will, the fourth edition will officially be out. Um, man, our it lines so well. I love your acronym, which we're gonna get into. I feel like yours is more maybe succinct than mine. Um, it's stickier than mine. And so I'm like, why the hell didn't I just read The Secret instead of spending a year to kind of write my own book? So yeah.

**Mark Miller: 26:47**

Well, that's the backstory because as you just suggested, uh having a leadership definition, it that won't do it, but it's where you start. I mean, that's not enough. Right. Because we were naive. That's another story for another day. We kind of thought when we did that, we could go back to selling chicken and people started calling saying, what's next? What's next? What's next? What's next?

**Chris Comeaux: 27:11**

And we'll kind of get we'll kind of get to that towards the end, right? So at the heart of the secret is this idea that great leaders serve people. If someone's hearing that phrase for the first time, what does servant leadership look like in practice? And if you won't even take it to what the serve actually is an acronym for the book, actually.

**Mark Miller: 27:29**

Yeah. Well, let me let me start by saying that what we were trying to identify were the strategic ways that leaders serve. In fact, we didn't start there. We started with what are the most critical things that leaders do. It was like what back to that behavioral definition. And what we ultimately realized through this process, and I've already mentioned it took months and months and months, is there are some strategic ways that leaders serve, which is not to be confused with a leader that will walk your dog, wash your car, and buy you donuts. And those are great if you can have those kind of people around you, but but none of those things make you a leader. You're only a leader when you engage in the behaviors and the activities and the practices. You do the things that leaders do, that is in fact what generates the leadership effect. And so we were we were just trying to tell our leaders, not just tell them, but then we could train, educate, and develop them to do those things that were necessary in order to lead. The fact that great leaders serve, that is the way we ultimately framed this content. They see the future, they engage and develop others, they reinvent continuously, they value results and relationships, and they embody a leader's heart. And when you do those things, you can actually become a leader that people want to follow.

**Chris Comeaux: 29:03**

That is so good. I'm going to repeat for our listeners. And but the acronym serve is see the future, engage and develop others, reinvent continuously, value results and relationships, and embody a leader's heart. And again, this so resonated with me, some of the principles, not only in my book, but some of the values that we've actually incorporated in our organization. In fact, the reinvent continuously really just resonated. One of our core values is we call it the learning mode, to be continually in that learning mode. And it makes such it's such a fun culture when you free people up to be in that learning mode. And being in healthcare, I think many of us have been hammered because you don't want faults with patients and families. You want a no faults kind of culture where you make mistakes and you cost a life. But then that creates almost this like freezing of people that we then you have to be in the knowing mode, which is the opposite of learning mode. And I've I felt great resonance with that concept of reinvent continuously.

**Mark Miller: 30:02**

Well, that to me, it that's a really fun part of the job for sure.

**Jeff Haffner: 30:05**

Don't miss part two of this episode coming this Friday.