

- Meghan M. Biro: [00:00](#) What was it like to be one of the first female graduates from West Point? Hold onto your hats, people, because we're going to be talking about overcoming challenges, building a more inclusive work culture, and reaching down deep to help others, all on this week's episode of #WorkTrends.
- Meghan M. Biro: [00:28](#) Welcome to the #WorkTrends podcast from TalentCulture. I'm your host, Meghan M. Biro. Every week, we interview interesting people who are re-imagining work. And join us on Twitter every Wednesday, 1:30 PM Eastern, using the hashtag WorkTrends.
- Meghan M. Biro: [00:45](#) This episode of #WorkTrends is supported by the CHRO Exchange, an exclusive networking event for HR execs and thought leaders. You can share insights, benchmark strategies, and learn from the heads of HR at Walmart, Verizon, the Atlanta Braves, and more, all at the 11th CHRO Exchange. This is taking place in Austin, Texas, May 19th through the 21st, while they still have them. Reserve your spot and learn more at chroexchange-us.iqpc.com.
- Meghan M. Biro: [01:20](#) Hey, Kevin. How's your day going?
- Kevin: [01:22](#) Well, better. This last week, man, as I've told you, my family and I were nursing the sick. Oh, goodness. Then we had to travel, and long story short, it all worked out. But one of the places I went to was D.C. for a conference. It's always fun to get out to the nation's capital, and my wife and I are going to take our girls there this fall. Relating to the theme for today's show, we're super excited for both of them growing up in a world where women are valued as much as men as leaders, whether that be in government, business, et cetera, and women who bring wisdom, and empathy, and different perspectives, and positive solutions to so many of today's world ills, don't you think?
- Meghan M. Biro: [02:04](#) I think you're right, and I think the exciting thing is we have data that backs some of this up, but let's be honest, I'm a little biased when it comes to this topic. I do know one thing for sure: leadership is still as important as a topic as it was a decade ago when I started blogging about leadership, and creating culture that is diverse is alive and well. We're seeing it right before our eyes.
- Kevin: [02:28](#) We are. In fact, when I get to the news in a minute, I'm going to share some examples of that, a great article that I found about this subject, but I do have to say, Meghan, in all my different

incarnations and careers that I've had to date, I've always really had the pleasure of working for some pretty decent leaders both men and women, but most of the toxicity, unfortunately, came from my gender, which was too bad. Not to say that women can't be bad leaders, they can.

Meghan M. Biro: [03:01](#)

Right, right.

Kevin: [03:01](#)

But that's just been my experience so far, and so I just look forward to more of that in business today, don't you?

Meghan M. Biro: [03:09](#)

Yeah, and I'm glad we're telling stories around this more and more, and people are hearing more, because that's how people become empowered to do something about it, and today's guest is no exception.

Kevin: [03:21](#)

Exactly, but before we get there, let's jump to the news first.

Kevin: [03:30](#)

I read a great New York Times article about women in leadership and the fact that, and I quote from the article, "During thousands of years of civilization, women have evolved to deal with the intractable perplexities of life and find means of peaceful coexistence, where men have traditionally found roads to conflict," i.e. beating each other up, unfortunately. And the article, it was really good, it was just more kind of weaving the story around what we've seen of late especially in leadership, not only in business but also in government.

Kevin: [04:05](#)

New Zealand's prime minister, for example, and all the amazing work she's done in her country, and then countries like Georgia and Ethiopia that have recently elected their first female presidents. Then for the first time, which I didn't know this, actually, women have the top jobs at the New York Stock Exchange, and at Nasdaq, and with a woman now as the CEO of Northrop Grumman, which is something that's also headquartered out in D.C., or at least one of their locations that I saw when I was out there. Four out of the five biggest defense companies are now run by women. Did not know that either. You probably saw the news, right, about Chicago getting its first black female mayor?

Meghan M. Biro: [04:45](#)

Yep.

Kevin: [04:45](#)

Which was great, and then last fall, as we know, or actually this January, 42 new women sworn into Congress. And again, the proof is going to be in the leadership pudding, but some of

these people have already proven themselves to be very sound leaders that I'm aware of, right? That's pretty exciting, don't you think?

Meghan M. Biro: [05:04](#) It's totally exciting, and I have a woman by the name of Elizabeth Warren who's my neighbor in Cambridge, and I literally run into her from time to time and catch up with her live in the parking lot of our favorite Whole Foods.

Kevin: [05:21](#) Oh, seriously?

Meghan M. Biro: [05:22](#) Yeah, yeah.

Kevin: [05:23](#) Wow.

Meghan M. Biro: [05:23](#) So I mean, women in leadership, it's really everywhere, and it's actually been this way for a while. I think we're all getting caught up on the numbers and the stories, which I talked about earlier, so I think it's really, truly an exciting time for women, especially in leadership roles, there's no question about it.

Kevin: [05:42](#) Absolutely, and the last thing I want to share from the article, again reading it verbatim, because it was really good writing, too, I always enjoy to read good writing out loud, but the last paragraph of the article was pretty poignant and powerful, and it goes, "It's past time for women to stop trying to cram themselves into outdated NASA spacesuits designed for an alien masculine physique." Which, I was finding that first part before I finished the other two sentences, was I was joking online with some folks a week or two ago, saying, "Why the heck can't they build the suit for this woman in such a short time?" And there was this interesting dialogue that ensued, but anyway. But the rest of that paragraph goes, "Salvation doesn't lie in pursuing traditional male paths of ejaculatory self-elevation." That is worth its weight in gold, that line, for a lot of different reasons.

Meghan M. Biro: [06:37](#) You got my attention.

Kevin: [06:37](#) How powerful and how clear it was, was what it's telling us there, right? And then the last sentence, "In drawing on women's wisdom without apology and pushing that wisdom forward into positions of power, we can soothe our world and maybe even save it." Damn right, damn right, wow. Right?

Meghan M. Biro: [06:54](#) Very powerful stuff, no question about it. When you think about the masculine physique and how we have to stop apologizing,

because I think that's what we've spent the last decade or two or three doing, right?

Kevin: [07:08](#) Yeah, right.

Meghan M. Biro: [07:09](#) Enough. We're here. Everybody, and that's men and women alike, want to feel like they matter.

Kevin: [07:17](#) Exactly.

Meghan M. Biro: [07:18](#) And having more of these stories to tell matters, and I think it's going to continue to move the needle.

Kevin: [07:23](#) Exactly, so let's get to our guest, Sara.

Meghan M. Biro: [07:31](#) We have a really fascinating guest on today's show. Sara Potecha was one of the first female grads from West Point and she learned volumes from that experience. These days, she's an accomplished author, speaker, and consultant, who has led cultural transformation initiatives for Fortune 500 companies and coached hundreds of leaders to higher levels of performance. Welcome to #WorkTrends, Sara!

Sara Potecha: [07:58](#) Thank you so much for having me.

Meghan M. Biro: [08:00](#) Very honored to have you. What an interesting, and fascinating, and impressive background you have.

Sara Potecha: [08:08](#) Thanks so much.

Meghan M. Biro: [08:09](#) So first I have to ask you this: where are you today, where are you sitting?

Sara Potecha: [08:14](#) I actually live near Louisville, Kentucky.

Meghan M. Biro: [08:17](#) Oh, nice.

Sara Potecha: [08:18](#) Yeah, we were transitioned here. My husband is a pilot with UPS and they moved us here a few years ago.

Meghan M. Biro: [08:26](#) Nice. Hey, UPS, that's a great gig, by the way.

Sara Potecha: [08:29](#) Yeah, it is.

- Meghan M. Biro: [08:31](#) What a huge company that is. We could get into that brand later, but welcome. And I shouldn't say sitting to all of you out there. Some of you may be standing, that's the good news, right?
- Sara Potecha: [08:43](#) Yes. You know, you want to stay fit and many people have those mobile desks now, you know?
- Meghan M. Biro: [08:49](#) Kind of cool, right?
- Sara Potecha: [08:51](#) I know, I know.
- Meghan M. Biro: [08:52](#) So first, I really want to hear more about the beginning of your career. You were one of the first women to graduate from West Point. What was that experience like for you?
- Sara Potecha: [09:01](#) Oh, it was both exhilarating, challenging, sometimes too challenging at times. Just to give a little background, at the time, the academy had been an all-male bastion for over 175 years, and then Gerald Ford, it was back in the '70s, signed it into law directing all the national service academies to begin to accept women, and so the superintendent and the Commandant of Cadets were kind of forced to do something very quickly in terms of the integration of women, and I was in the fourth graduating class, but many of those early decisions impacted classes for a long time. For example, entrance exams included a series of physical aptitude tests and one was chin-ups, and what they decided is, "Well, we're going to change the standards for women owing to the differences in our physiology," so women did something called a flexed arm hang which is pulling yourself over the chin-up bar and holding yourself there as long as you can.
- Sara Potecha: [10:02](#) Well, that one decision had such backlash among the all-male corps of cadets because they figured, "Things are easier for them to get in here than us." And so it kind of set up this animosity between the women that would be entering. So there was a series of things that they didn't think through. I mean, the first class, for example, they didn't think about putting shades on the barracks windows when they retrofitted the barracks. Of course, when I got there we had shades, thankfully. So there was a series of things they didn't think about. We didn't have very many officer women that were actually our role models, and there were so few of us, we only made up 10% of the corps, each class has about a thousand cadets, and so there were about a little over a hundred women, so for the first 10 years of

women at West Point, the attrition rates were over 50%, so that kind of gives you an idea. As compared to men, it's going to be about 30%. Not everybody who decides to go to West Point is going to graduate.

Meghan M. Biro: [11:01](#) No, that's very true.

Sara Potecha: [11:03](#) So we had this, yeah, the combination of a very rigorous environment, you have to be very top of your class to get a nomination to get to the academy, so rigorous classes but overly hostile environment, quite frankly.

Meghan M. Biro: [11:18](#) What I find fascinating is that men at the time weren't willing to look at the physiology of women. I mean, it's literally a fact that women do push-ups and pull-ups very differently than men do, just from an anatomical perspective, and that the culture, nobody thought about it beforehand, so everybody just went into it in this sort of defensive, "We'll just deal with it in real time," and the results are, of course, what you're talking about, not that great for anybody involved. So I know you coach women on how to handle toxic work environments. What advice do you give them?

Sara Potecha: [11:56](#) What I typically encounter with my women clients is not blatant harassment per se, but more subtle dismissive behaviors that seem to eat away at their self-confidence. As a coach, my role is to help them discover ways they can address those challenges by getting them to consider several different options that will work for them in that given situation. For example, I might ask, "Whom have you observed that handled being dismissed at a meeting and overcame that situation successfully? How can you learn from his or her approach?" Other questions I might ask was, "What women leaders come to mind when you think of a strong but assertive woman? What have you seen them do that you might emulate?" And once we identify some of the very skills that they need to have, we talk about ways for them to develop those skillsets.

Sara Potecha: [12:50](#) But another thing I always include in my coaching is really suggesting emotional intelligence methods that they can employ to keep themselves calm while they're facing difficult scenarios. By remaining calm, they're better able to think their way through a situation rather than just shut down or become overwhelmed with the negative emotions and lash out.

- Meghan M. Biro: [13:12](#) So Sara, can you give our audience some examples of those? Like when somebody's feeling dismissed, for example, what does that look like, or sound like, or feel like?
- Sara Potecha: [13:22](#) Right. So they might be invited to a meeting, and they have some good insight, but they notice that the leader of the meeting, typically a white male in many of the organizations that I've worked in, that he never looks directly at them, he always defers to someone else who will speak up, and sometimes women, we're a bit reticent because we look for different things from our leaders, sometimes, than men do, and unless we have the full answer, maybe we think we can't set an example. So I've seen things like that, where somebody who was hired for a particular, they had this skillset, but when they're put in an environment where they might be one of the women at the table, so to speak, that they're being reticent, and then when they do offer something, it's glanced aside. They turn to somebody else, "Well, what do you think about that, John?" for example.
- Sara Potecha: [14:16](#) So what I help them kind of see is how do you have influence when you don't have a lot of influence? And a lot of that is reminding them of the things that they can say in a very deliberate way to engage those around them, and to show their engagement by speaking up, to practice speaking up in a safe environment first, and so then they get to the ... Sometimes we role play, and sometimes what we do is then say, "Well, why don't you try that in," let's say you are a leader of people, encouraging people below you to speak up, and then engaging people that are colleagues in discussions, and then practicing before that and being very intentional when you go into that meeting of how you're going to see the dynamics and say, "Well, you know, I have this alternative view, could we consider something else?"
- Meghan M. Biro: [15:06](#) Basically everyone sticking up for yourself and knowing how to be strategic, and if you have to practice ahead of time doing that, do it, right?
- Sara Potecha: [15:15](#) Yes.
- Meghan M. Biro: [15:15](#) So you graduated from West Point 35 years ago. What is different, I mean, this is like the zinger question of all, right? What's different about work culture now? And talk to us about what's different at West Point now, as well as being at work.

Sara Potecha: [15:31](#) Well, when I attended the academy, we had a fourth class system that was much more regimented. For example, we had to ping, that is, walk briskly from point to point. Even up stairwells, we had to square corners as we walked up so upperclassmen could have the easier way down. When we were at our meals, we needed to memorize upperclassmen's beverage preferences, even how many ice cubes they wanted, for example. Those requirements have totally been replaced with a greater emphasis on developing leaders, so cadets are given many more opportunities to practice leadership, to gain feedback and get better. And the academy offers numerous majors. I was going to be an engineer whether I wanted to or not. So now there's several different options, and they can also have these abilities to take summer classes. So let's say the academic schedule's very rigorous, they can take a summer class to even it out.

Meghan M. Biro: [16:34](#) Okay, very nice.

Sara Potecha: [16:36](#) Yes, we didn't have those kind of options. We even had classes on Saturdays, so I hated studying on Fridays. There's also many more women. There's about 25% of the corps is made up of women, much more women officers, more actually instructors that come from other colleges, so it creates less of an insulated kind of environment, and I think because there's so many grads that are women that have come back to the academy, in fact, the current dean is one of the first women graduates, that creates this ability to talk about things that they didn't talk about at all, we didn't really even have or know of a process to report sexual harassment when I attended, and now this is something that's required, and they do talk about those things, so it's really evolved.

Meghan M. Biro: [17:24](#) And what about work culture now?

Sara Potecha: [17:27](#) Yes, I would say there's been a lot of changes. I think for some people in my era, they have worked for one or two companies their entire life. We don't see that at all. People are changing jobs-

Meghan M. Biro: [17:40](#) That's an understatement.

Sara Potecha: [17:40](#) ... pretty frequently. Yeah.

Meghan M. Biro: [17:41](#) People are changing jobs at almost an alarming rate now. I used to think maybe two years ago it was refreshing, now it's like,

okay, if you're there for two and a half years, especially some of the younger generations, it's like it's go time, and that's even if you love your job, by the way.

Sara Potecha: [17:59](#) I agree, I agree. A lot of remote working, that was not something that, when I first got out of the military, that was even a thought in people's minds. The use of technology in order to do that, of course. I work with a company now that, they're really distributed all over Canada and the United States, and a major portion of that workforce works from home. It's absolutely amazing, and it's a very big company, so you begin to see those differences. People have a lot more flexibility. There's also this whole movement toward currently just contract work. I know several people of my era, that's what they like. They spend three months with a company, then they come back, and then they spend three more months with a different company, and they like that flexibility.

Meghan M. Biro: [18:44](#) I talk to many, many company leaders who are trying to change their cultures to become more inclusive. How can we all build more inclusive organizations?

Sara Potecha: [18:55](#) I think it has to begin with the leadership at the top of the organization. If the leaders of the organization's words and behaviors align with inclusiveness, then that will show that this organization values diversity, and it will trickle down to all the rest of the leaders in the organization.

Sara Potecha: [19:14](#) But I have seen women in leadership who get to a certain level impact that conversation by reminding that very leadership of their values, because often companies will state, "We value diversity and inclusion," but their hiring and promotion practices do not result in a diverse workforce, so I've seen these courageous women state, "We say we value diversity, yet we are not promoting minorities and women. In fact, we are losing women leaders and minorities, so if we're committed to valuing diversity, and research shows it will result in greater innovation and profitability, what do we have to do differently going forward?"

Sara Potecha: [19:53](#) So often leading by asking good questions starts the conversations and starts the change. But I think there's practical ways. Companies can look at removing bias from the evaluation and promotion decisions, giving managers the tools to get them thinking about who they invite to meetings, who they assign and give stretch assignments, and who they consider for

improvement, and ensuring under-represented groups are on committees to measure the effectiveness of the very programs that are supposed to create diversity and inclusion. I think those are good means.

Meghan M. Biro: [20:28](#) So Sara, tell us, where does HR fit into this conversation around diversity and inclusion?

Sara Potecha: [20:33](#) Well, since I've lived in that world at different times in my career, I think they have a critical role, as they often have the statistics on hiring and retention, and they can educate through facts just how diverse the workforce is or is not. Also, in many companies I've worked for, it's the HRBPs that are on the front of the company in terms of they know what the employee complaints are that are related to diversity, and they can intervene, they can educate managers, they can enforce those inclusive behaviors, and they can act as mediators to begin those discussions and dialogues to change behavior.

Meghan M. Biro: [21:12](#) One of the major themes in your book is camaraderie, why building camaraderie matters. Tell us a bit more about that.

Sara Potecha: [21:20](#) Well, from the minute you enter those gray gates at the academy, you become part of some team, some organization, and it is really inculcated into us that it should be team accomplishment over individual accomplishment, so from Army-Navy games where we'll shout, "The 12th man is here!" Meaning we're part of that team as well, to accomplishing our military maneuvers that we might practice, to working on engineering projects together, we're taught to value teamwork over individual accomplishment because army missions, typically lives are at stake, and often you have to learn other members of your team's roles, so if something happens to them during a mission, you can continue. I am convinced that great results occur in corporations when the leaders are committed to overall success of the company rather than their own personal agendas or careers.

Meghan M. Biro: [22:17](#) Or their egos.

Sara Potecha: [22:19](#) Yes.

Meghan M. Biro: [22:19](#) Right?

Sara Potecha: [22:20](#) Yes.

- Meghan M. Biro: [22:21](#) So I want to talk a little bit more about leadership, and I think a lot of people think of military leadership in particular as hierarchical, as absolute, but you talk about humble leadership, and you and I share that. I've been talking about humble leaders for probably the last decade at this point, and the importance of it. What does that mean to you?
- Sara Potecha: [22:44](#) Well, I think it is really this embodiment of the real measure of leadership if you have a followership. And when you say that the mission is, as we would say in military terms, is what we're all focused on, and I'm going to do everything as your leader to ensure that you're going to be successful, that takes a certain amount of humility, and it's not about, "We did it well." After every event, we'd do something called an after-action review. We would decide how we as a unit could be better. So it's less about what we accomplished, it's more about what the team accomplished.
- Sara Potecha: [23:27](#) So I wanted to share a little story. I remember after I'd gotten out of the military, I was interviewed by a CEO for an operational role in company. It was a mid-size company. I remember him reading over my resume, looking at me, reading over it again, and he finally said, "So, West Point and the army. You know you just can't give orders around here."
- Sara Potecha: [23:51](#) And I thought back to the long deployments of my 300-person company in all kinds of weather, all kinds of terrain, less than ideal circumstances with little to no sleep for several days, and I knew it wasn't about giving orders that resulted in that army unit's success. It was the idea that we emphasized over and over, that every member of the team was critical to our success, and we needed them to all do their jobs and to help one another so we could accomplish our missions and come back safely.
- Sara Potecha: [24:22](#) So I told that to the CEO, that leadership was about inspiring them to go the extra mile even though they were often cold, exhausted, and missing their families, and so then he kind of looked at me and he goes, "How old are you, anyway?"
- Meghan M. Biro: [24:36](#) Hey, isn't that an illegal question?
- Sara Potecha: [24:38](#) Exactly. I think he just didn't believe, maybe, that this petite woman had actually done what she said, or he had never heard somebody talk about it in that level, but that's kind of what a lot of veterans face when they get out of the military.

- Meghan M. Biro: [24:53](#) Did you actually get the job, or take the job?
- Sara Potecha: [24:57](#) I decided against it because of some of his other questions, which was like, I don't think he really understands.
- Meghan M. Biro: [25:04](#) We have a disconnect happening.
- Sara Potecha: [25:05](#) Yes, we did.
- Meghan M. Biro: [25:07](#) So let's talk about you and your legacy. What do you want to build as a leader?
- Sara Potecha: [25:12](#) Well, one of the reasons I wrote this book was I wanted my three daughters to know more about my experience as a West Point woman, and yet as I began to write, I knew my message would resonate with women and other marginalized groups, and so my book evolved into a series of stories that teach leadership principles that I gained as a result of living through the crucible of the West Point experience. I also include after each chapter suggestions on how the reader can apply those axioms to their own lives. I call it cultivating character. So in many ways, speaking and having companies read and apply those leadership tenets is my legacy.
- Meghan M. Biro: [25:52](#) So finally, Sara, I want to talk about how we can all thrive despite a system that isn't always designed for everybody to succeed. We're not there yet. What's your advice for thriving no matter what system you're working in?
- Sara Potecha: [26:06](#) Well, I've worked in several organizations and found myself stymied at times, and here are a couple suggestions. One of the things you have to do is focus on what you can control, which includes your attitude, and the work that you do to demonstrate your competence, and do those things extremely well. I've also found ways to demonstrate that you're still a team player, and if the department, for example, is needing ... the schedule is constantly changing and creating havoc, you can ask to take over that role. It may be outside your role, but you're demonstrating you're a team player nonetheless.
- Sara Potecha: [26:42](#) Then, sometimes within corporations, volunteer for something unrelated to your current role because having a mental break from disfunction can be very healthy for you. And then you always have to play the long game, because what I've found, most situations are transient, so you adopt the mentality that this too shall pass, and I really tell a lot of the folks I work with

is, you have to find ways to relieve frustration and stress through regular exercise, deep breathing, eating healthy, avoid things like alcohol relief, because those will have other issues.

Meghan M. Biro: [27:19](#) The vices.

Sara Potecha: [27:20](#) Yes.

Meghan M. Biro: [27:23](#) Right?

Sara Potecha: [27:23](#) One of the thing that I think has helped me, propelled me when I felt stuck in a situation, is I have always worked at developing a positive connection of peers and colleagues that I could throw ideas out, or have them actually suggest things that I might do, or give me connections to other situations that would improve where I am. So sometimes I've been able to do that within a company to find out about something that would be more fulfilling, so I could move roles, or sometimes it was exterior to the company. I think you can still try everything you can to create value, but having that good source of people that you can rely on will give you ideas on how to either solve that, or find something else that works better for you. And obviously if something is real harassment and something that is untenable, sometimes you just have to leave, and you have to go find something else. But I think if you do those things initially, sometimes you'll be able to find a situation that is tolerable until you learn enough, or that person that you're working for, or that person on your team, something happens and they leave, and things change again.

Meghan M. Biro: [28:34](#) Sara Potecha. Thanks for being such a great role model to women out there in the world of work.

Sara Potecha: [28:42](#) Well, thank you so much, and I encourage anybody that wants to get access to my book, you can get it on Amazon, or you can go on my website. If you purchase it that way, I'll send you a signed copy.

Meghan M. Biro: [28:55](#) Nice. Bonus round, everybody.

Sara Potecha: [28:58](#) Yeah.

Meghan M. Biro: [28:58](#) Go get it.

Sara Potecha: [28:59](#) www.westpointwoman.com.

- Meghan M. Biro: [29:06](#) Let's keep the conversation a-moving. Join us for #WorkTrends on Twitter to talk about building a more diverse workplace with Sara Potecha. We are going to be on Twitter Wednesday, April 17th at 1:30 PM Eastern, 10:30 AM Pacific. Join us wherever you are, and if you'd like to get our Twitter chat questions in advance, sign up for our newsletter at talentculture.com.
- Meghan M. Biro: [29:31](#) This episode of #WorkTrends is supported by the CHRO Exchange, an exclusive networking event for HR execs and thought leaders. You can share insights, benchmark strategies, and learn from the heads of HR at Walmart, Verizon, the Atlanta Braves, and more, all at the 11th CHRO Exchange. This is taking place in Austin, Texas, May 19th through the 21st, while they still have them. Reserve your spot and learn more at chroexchange-us.iqpc.com.
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