

- Meghan M. Biro: [00:00](#) We are living in very turbulent times these days. As much as we hate to admit it, sometimes organizations need to prepare for the worst. But how exactly do you build those plans and the leadership skills needed to lead in times of crisis? This week I talk with Eric McNulty. He's coauthor of You're It: Crisis, Change and How to Lead When It Matters Most, about just this.
- Meghan M. Biro: [00:36](#) 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. Join us on Twitter every Wednesday, 1:30 PM Eastern, using the hashtag WorkTrends.
- Meghan M. Biro: [00:53](#) So here's a story from The Washington Post, but it's something that I'm sure many of you have been following recently. The National Basketball Association is currently facing an international crisis in China. After Daryl Morey, the General Manager of the Houston Rockets, tweeted his support of the protests in Hong Kong. The Chinese government has spoken out against the statements, and the Houston Rockets, formerly the most popular team in China, will no longer have their games aired in this country, among many other things.
- Meghan M. Biro: [01:26](#) This isn't exactly the type of crisis Eric and I will be discussing, but an incident like this really highlights the importance of being prepared for a crisis and honing your crisis leadership skills. We're going to dig in deeper today on all of these topics.
- Meghan M. Biro: [01:46](#) Our guest today is Eric McNulty. Eric is the coauthor of You're It: Crisis, Change and How to Lead When It Matters Most. He's also Associate Director of the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative at Harvard's Kennedy School of Business, which happens to be right in my neighborhood, by the way. Kind of neat, right?
- Meghan M. Biro: [02:09](#) Today, we're going to be talking about an important topic, leading in times of crisis. So let's jump right in, Eric. No small topic, eh?
- Eric McNulty: [02:19](#) No, sad to say it's a bit of a growth industry crisis leadership.
- Meghan M. Biro: [02:24](#) It gets worse by the hour, if anyone's tuning in to last night's CNN episode. It's unbelievable, Eric, right?

- Eric McNulty: [02:33](#) No matter where you turn, no matter what industry you're in, public, private, nonprofit sector, there is lots of turbulence around us.
- Meghan M. Biro: [02:39](#) Everybody, if you're out there and you're in the audience, utilize the hashtag WorkTrends and put on your seatbelt. First, let's talk about your book. What does the title You're It mean?
- Eric McNulty: [02:51](#) Well, when you think about leading in a time of turbulence, of crisis, of significant disruption, if you are going to be that leader, you are it. People are looking to you for direction, for guidance, for reassurance, for permission, in some cases. We like that title, You're It, because you, as a pronoun, has that magic ability to be both singular, you as the individual, and plural. So, the team you need to rally around you, the group you need to get moving in a certain direction. So it reminds you to, both be aware of yourself as the individual who you do need to be, and then what do you need others to do? How do you rally them around you, so you can get to the best possible outcome?
- Meghan M. Biro: [03:26](#) So clearly, Eric, you're a seasoned writer. You've been at this a while, but what inspired you to actually do the book? Because those are two different things to some people.
- Eric McNulty: [03:37](#) No, absolutely. I think that having now accumulated more than 15 years of knowledge, of observations, of research, around what it takes to be successful in a high stakes, high [inaudible 00:03:49] situation, my coauthors and I felt like it was time to put it together into a single volume, to try and bring the pieces together, and to do it in a way that we'd get much broader distribution than simply people coming to a classroom.
- Eric McNulty: [04:01](#) Being able to go out and have to interpret it in ways that you could read it, you could work through some of the tools, practice some of the skills and actually get better yourself. Because any one of us could be called upon to lead in a crisis situation, and the more prepared you are, the more likely you are to succeed.
- Meghan M. Biro: [04:16](#) That's such a good point. What are we doing, individually, to handle this? So thank you for sharing. I would say to all of you out there, if you've been in one of Eric's classes, let's spread the word, shall we? Get on Instagram, tell a story, tell a Snapchat, right? I mean, there are so many different ways. But you're right, ultimately, a book gives you and your co-writers that platform, by which we can then go and share it on social media,

as one example. But there's several ways in which we're communicating. So, very exciting times, but very turbulent times.

Meghan M. Biro: [04:52](#) You and your co-writers have a model of leadership called Meta-Leadership. What exactly does that mean and how does that tie into crisis leadership?

Eric McNulty: [05:00](#) Well, we looked at the various examples, and as often as possible, deploy in the middle of a crisis or as soon thereafter as we can get there, actually be with the people who are making the tough decisions, who are in those leadership positions. As we looked at it, we realized there was three lenses that would help you understand, either why things are going well, or perhaps why they're not.

Eric McNulty: [05:22](#) So it starts with the person. Who are you as an individual? Meghan, you and I are different people. So, even though we may be in a similar situation and trying to do similar things, we will do them differently, because we have different experience, different expertise, different birth order perhaps. I mean, it's all kinds of things that make you a specific person. So how do you inhabit the leader you need to be, given who you are?

Eric McNulty: [05:44](#) Then as a person, you're in a situation, you're in a context, something is happening. Have you seen it before or not seen it before? How much information do you have versus what you want to have? So the better you can diagnose and understand that situation, the more likely you are to be able to make the right calls, to be able to bring in the right resources and get to the right outcome.

Eric McNulty: [06:05](#) Then of course in organizations, we're never alone. So that connectivity, that third dimension, is to remind people that you need to be connected to the right other people, other organizations, departments, outside entities, whoever it happens to be, who you need to help you succeed. Because if it's truly a crisis at large-scale situation, you're not going to be doing it by yourself, you're going to need help. So, have you built the relationships before, during and after, that enable you to lead effectively in a difficult situation?

Eric McNulty: [06:35](#) So those three lenses, the person, the situation and connectivity, are a way to structure your thinking and your practice, to be able to better understand how you're going to navigate those turbulent waters.

Meghan M. Biro: [06:45](#) Very interesting. You remind me of the fact that we can no longer hide between the walls of our individual cultures as companies and businesses, right? We are all affected, we are all in this together. If you're out there and you're leading a company right now, let's start tuning in. What can leaders do to help build morale for their organizations during a crisis? How does this impact how they lead, how they build culture, how they retain their talent?

Eric McNulty: [07:16](#) Absolutely. That morale, that optimism in a difficult situation, is critical. That's because that's when you begin to see resilience. So one of my favorite stories, in this regard, is Admiral Thad Allen, who's a former Commandant to the Coast Guard, someone we've had the pleasure of working with multiple times.

Eric McNulty: [07:32](#) During the Katrina response when, as you may recall, things were not going well. He was brought in to help turn it around. One of the things he did was he gathered a lot of the federal workers in a ... they were using an abandoned mall as sort of an operation center. He got up on the table and people were demoralized, they were confused, they were frustrated. He said, "Here's what we're going to do. From now on, I want you to treat everyone you encounter as if they were a member of your family. That way, if you make a mistake, you're going to make a mistake doing too much, not too little. If someone has a problem with you making a mistake by doing too much, they haven't got a problem with you, they've got a problem with me."

Eric McNulty: [08:08](#) He said you could feel the barometric pressure in the room change. That took me about 30 seconds to encapsulate the talk he gave, but it did everything right. First of all, it gave clear direction and values-based direction. Treat everyone as if they are a member of your family. Then he said, "It's okay to make a mistake. If you're going to, here's the direction in which I want you to make it. Oh, by the way, if someone's got a problem with that, I've got your back." So he reassured people. He gave them permission to act and make decisions, he gave them some good values-based guideposts within which they should operate. It completely changed the morale of that workforce and got them moving in a very positive direction.

Eric McNulty: [08:46](#) So if you as a leader, first of all, be present. He was there in the room, standing on a table. It wasn't a video conference. He made decisions and he communicated very clearly. "Here's

what we're trying to do, here's how we're going to do it. Oh, by the way, I've got your back." If you can do those things, you're going to be very effective leading in, no matter how bad the crisis.

Meghan M. Biro: [09:03](#) Right now these are exciting times, especially if you're in HR. The role of HR is expanding within organizations around the globe. What can HR do to better prepare organizations for crises?

Eric McNulty: [09:17](#) I think HR is going to have a critical role to play. I've worked with HR executives in departments for quite a number of years now. Because people are at the center of any crisis, and so HR has a natural role to play there, one would think. Though, that isn't always the case.

Eric McNulty: [09:32](#) So I think what HR can do is, first of all, they need to become very good friends with their counterparts in safety, security, health safety and environment, whatever the business continuity and safety function is in the organization. They should be linked at the hip, to understand what each other is going to do, what the expectations are, what the implications are of different actions. That's one piece.

Eric McNulty: [09:52](#) Then really, HR folks can be a voice for taking the potential threat seriously and allocating the time and the resources to prepare through your exercises, through drills, through making sure people have some idea what to do. Just as we do our fire drills a couple of times a year, so people know what to do, other kinds of threats. The better are you prepared, the first couple of steps to take. It could be a deep breath, it could be this is how we're leaving the building, whatever it happens to be. That calms people down and gets them moving.

Eric McNulty: [10:23](#) But the other piece where I think HR can have a really significant impact, is helping organizations think through the implications of different scenarios. So here's one, taken from the headlines. I won't identify the company, but it's an actual situation. It was an active shooter event in a community. At first, the shooter was identified as an employee of the company. Okay, so what does that mean?

Eric McNulty: [10:45](#) Then it turned out that the shooter wasn't actually an employee, it was someone with the same name, but another employee was actually one of the victims. He survived, but he was shot multiple times. So what does that mean? Then it

turned out that it was actually a new employee who hadn't yet qualified for the health insurance plan. So what does that mean? What are we going to do or not do?

Eric McNulty: [11:06](#) So by working through these different pieces, and in this case, they first thought, "Okay, we're going to pay for everything. It's a horrible event. How can we not be compassionate and pay for this?" Until someone said, "Well, why is this worse than a cancer diagnosis? Are we now just going to extend our health insurance to everybody from day one? Maybe yes, maybe no, let's think through what that means." In this case, they wound up making a donation to the person's family through a foundation, rather than making the changes to the health plan.

Eric McNulty: [11:32](#) But again, it's those questions that popped up in the middle of an incident that no one had thought about. If you're in HR and you know a lot of these factors and you begin to play with the different pieces, just pull from the headlines and say, "What if this happened here? What would we do? What are the decisions we're going to have to make? What is the information we're going to need in order to make those decisions? Who needs to be at the table?" Those kinds of things. So I think HR is in a great position to catalyze those conversations and to really take a leadership role with them.

Meghan M. Biro: [11:56](#) You know makes me sad, Eric, beyond just a lot of what we're experiencing in say the political landscape right now? Is the fact that HR's left out of these conversations a lot of the time though. I like what you're saying, I understand it, but as a former practitioner in the HR recruiting space, it makes me sad that we're still not really, and everybody likes to say a seat at the table and it feels very buzzwordy. But how do we get HR in these conversations? Because I agree with you completely, but the reality is, we're not there. There's still a gap between the leadership team, HR and other parts of the organization.

Eric McNulty: [12:36](#) You're right. Since you and I have both been doing this for a while, we know that seat at the table conversation's been going on for a long time. There certainly are some really good HR professionals who are at the table and they have demonstrated value, and other folks who are still fighting their way in. The technique that I recommend is for that HR person to go into the COO to the CEO and have a conversation about, "If this happens, what are the first three questions you're going to need me to be able to answer?"

Eric McNulty: [13:04](#) So you come in with a question, "I'm going to need to serve you. How can I best serve you?" That opens up that conversation of, "Okay, so what do you mean what? Why are we thinking about this?" It gives the HR person a way to demonstrate value, in terms of, "Hey, I'm already thinking about this. I'm thinking about the implications and I know there are answers you're going to want from me. So let's think about now how I can be sure I can get them for you as quickly as possible."

Eric McNulty: [13:28](#) Because when a crisis hits, the general counsel gets called right away, the CFO usually gets called right away. Then further down the table, eventually are the communications people, the HR folks. HR often gets put in that go fix it role or go take care of the aftermath, and you really want to be involved earlier on.

Eric McNulty: [13:46](#) So I think if you could begin to stimulate this conversation around what questions are you going to need me to be able to answer for you? Which is a good way of, "You're a good player here, you're demonstrating value." It opens up the person you're talking to, again, the CEO or the CFO, say, "Oh, yeah, that's right. I better be thinking about that. What's the implication here for our family leave policy? What's going to happen with this, that or the other?" It gets you involved in it, in a very different sort of way. But I think promptly by questions is an effective way to stimulate that conversation.

Meghan M. Biro: [14:15](#) Eric, what can we do to build our leadership skills to better prepare ourselves for times of crisis? Because unfortunately, I feel like this is just beginning in some ways. Even if we fix problems that are right in front of us, these, I think, turbulent times are becoming the new normal.

Eric McNulty: [14:36](#) I think you're right. I think we are in for a sustained period of turbulence. Again, we are seeing there are some crises you can anticipate, others you cannot. Go to a Starbucks a year or so ago, had an incident in a single store that blew up into a national crisis around their policy, around race, and you have to respond quickly. But the interesting thing we have found is that while crisis leadership is the hook at which people, "Come, sit in one of my classrooms." About halfway through they say, "Wait, you're talking about building your emotional intelligence, thinking about how you're going to make decisions quickly. How do you communicate more effectively?"

Eric McNulty: [15:13](#) Those are things I can probably do every day, right? Yeah. Now you get it. It's actually not a different set of skills, it's being able

to take your skills to a different level. So by practicing every day, having those tough conversations, telling truth to power, hearing truth to power, but again, working on how do we make decisions and how do I make sure those around me are equipped to make good decisions? Building that institutional capacity. Then when you have to step up to a higher level, you're ready to go.

Eric McNulty: [15:39](#) Then I think the second piece is, again, all you have to do is pop up the computer and look on your favorite news site and you will find things that other organizations are facing and say, "What if that happened here? What if we have to have that conversation about race or about sexual harassment or there's an active shooter?" Whatever it happens to be. With the Jeffrey Epstein case, there's all kinds of things around us. Just say, "What if some version of that happened here? What do we need to do? How do we get ready?" By getting ready, you'll do better every single day.

Meghan M. Biro: [16:08](#) Okay. So we get to have some fun here and move things to the future. I know you spend a lot of time with students and people of all generations. So, what big predictions do you have for the next five to 10 years for the future of work?

Eric McNulty: [16:26](#) That is such an interesting question and I think there is so many threads to pull there. I think that we are going to see the turbulence continuing, the diversity continuing to grow. I think that the future of work is going to be ... problem-solving is still going to be the critical skill, I think, and being able to solve more and more complex problems. Which requires curiosity, it requires us actually valuing time to think and reflect, which we don't do very much now.

Eric McNulty: [16:55](#) I'm working on a piece right now about rethinking productivity, because we're still very task-oriented. How many emails did you do? How many meetings did you go to? But your most valuable time may be taking an hour and going for a walk in the park across the street from the office, so you can just reflect and think, or reading something you don't normally read. I mean, get outside of your industry, get outside of your comfort zone and read something different or have a different conversation.

Eric McNulty: [17:22](#) So I think it can be very much about making connections, which is part of the problem-solving as well. Stimulating your curiosity and being able to continually evolve and update, both your skills and your mindset and your mental models. So it [inaudible]



00:17:38] be much more of the continual refresh as part of being able to execute and deliver value.

Meghan M. Biro: [17:42](#) You remind me, Eric, of yesterday I was in my yoga class, and it's funny, I was the same exact thing. It's my hour of just disconnecting and then thinking through things in a more peaceful and productive way. There is this movement out there, there's a yoga movement for all of you yogis out there. You know yoga is sort of exploding and it has been for several years now. I wonder if that's a reaction to some of what we're talking about today. It's just that needing to be in a place where digital is turned off for a little bit.

Meghan M. Biro: [18:21](#) So obviously, Eric, I think you and I could continue to talk for hours and hours and hours, and we'd love to have you back here in the future on another podcast, so we can do just that. But thank you again for sharing with us.

Eric McNulty: [18:33](#) Meghan, it's my pleasure. Thank you for taking the time.

Meghan M. Biro: [18:41](#) To keep this conversation going, join us for our WorkTrends Twitter chat. We're going to be on the Twitters with Eric McNulty on Wednesday, October 23rd at 1:30 PM Eastern, 10:30 AM Pacific. Join us to talk about the steps you can take to confront crises at your organization. If you'd like to be in the know and get our Twitter chat questions in advance, sign up for our newsletter at [talentculture.com](http://talentculture.com).

Meghan M. Biro: [19:15](#) Thanks to listening to WorkTrends from TalentCulture. Join us every Wednesday at 1:30 PM Eastern for a live Twitter chat with our podcast guest. To learn more about guests featured on today's show, visit the show notes for this episode at [talentculture.com](http://talentculture.com), and help us spread the word. Subscribe to WorkTrends wherever you listen to podcasts. Leave us a rating, review in iTunes, share WorkTrends with your coworkers, your friends. Look forward to it. See you next time.