



Building a Culture of Kindness and High Performance: Leadership Lessons from Dakota

WITH GUI COSTIN

**Imagining Bridges to Better Leadership
Podcast**

KEVIN NEAL: Welcome to another episode of Imagining Bridges to Better Leadership, where we explore how creativity, culture, and courage come together to shape leaders who build rather than break, connect rather than control. I'm your host, Dr. Kevin Neal. And I'm excited to have you join us on this journey.

This is going to be a great show today. Today, we're joined by a visionary, who is reshaping the way financial worlds connects and communicates. Gui Costin is the founder and CEO of Dakota, a powerhouse in the intersection of finance, software, data, and media, all headquartered in the heart of Philadelphia. Under Gui's leadership, Dakota has become known for transforming how investment firms discover opportunities, build relationships, and share their stories.

But Gui isn't just a business leader, he's a trailblazer, with an eye for innovation and a heart for helping others succeed. Whether he's driving growth in the financial sector, creating cutting edge technology, or producing content that informs and inspires, Gui is all about making the complex, simple, and impossible, possible. Get ready for an insightful conversation with someone who's as passionate about people as he is about performance. Gui Costin. Welcome, Gui.

GUI COSTIN: Thank you so much for having me. It's good to be here.

KEVIN NEAL: Glad to have you. Glad to have you. Listen, what we do on all of our podcasts, the first question we ask our guests is, what is your superpower? What is it that you love about Gui? What is it that you love about what Gui does?

GUI COSTIN: So I'd love to solve problems. So I'd say, I'm the ultimate problem solver. And whether it's for our customers or our teammates, it's solving problems, being creative around problem-solving. And it really is rooted in the Amazon get to yes. There are no no's in Amazon, get to yes. And we're very lucky that we have this tool at our disposal that doesn't know how to say no, which is an LLM, where it's ChatGPT, Claude, Grok, what have you. And so it's

all about solving problems. And now, you have these tools that can even help you solve problems faster.

KEVIN NEAL: That's great. I love that idea of get to yes, because there's so many people in different industries and especially in leadership, who like to say no. For some reason, they prefer to say no than to say yes, or at least, say no initially. Why do you think that is? Why do you think so many people in leadership like to at least start with no, and you may be able to get them to get to a yes?

GUI COSTIN: I think, for the most part, people could create work for them. They could be intimidated. They could just not have a growth mindset and not even see it. They just want to be a naysayer. But a lot of times, they don't see themselves as being a naysayer, they see themselves as being realistic. And I'm writing a book right now, our third book called Be Kind. And whether we like it or not, so much goes back to our upbringing and how we were brought up as kids. And the trauma. And everybody, in some way, shape, or form, has trauma. And a lot of that really informs how you act in your later years. You know what I mean? Because if you're a leader, and your dad told you, if you're really nice to people, take advantage of you. And so as a leader, you're going to be a jerk. You know what I mean? That's just one small example. You know what I mean? My dad always said, if I'm nice to my employees, they're going to take advantage of me, so I'm going to be a jerk.

KEVIN NEAL: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I know what you mean. And one of the things I do when I speak all across the country, I speak about self-awareness, realizing why you do what you do, and when you realize why you do what you do, you realize the things that take you down a certain path emotionally. It helps you to prevent a lot of frustration. It helps you prevent a lot of stress, because those things, and you know to veer off and not to get entangled with certain things. So I think that's so important. Self-awareness is a large part of what leadership is all about.

GUI COSTIN: I couldn't agree more. And you said that beautifully. Being able to look at your own behavior, and examine it, as a third party, that's really powerful.

KEVIN NEAL: So let me ask you this... because I want to get to your story, how do your career choices inform where you are now?

GUI COSTIN: So I was with my kids over Christmas vacation at home. And they're all in their early 20s, three of them. And they go, dad, before you started to code in 2006, how many jobs did you have before? So I counted, eight. I had eight jobs before I found Dakota. And my son, who's 21, well, he's a real character, he goes, dad, why don't you walk us through that? So I get through the story from 89. And he goes, I counted 11. So these are all W-2 jobs. You know what I mean? He goes, how about do it one more time? Count to 13, 13 legitimate W-2s. And so when I started Dakota, all that bouncing around really shaped me to be able to create an organization, where you didn't have to leave, where people could come and build careers. You can slap them in. We can mentor them. We can coach them. We can teach them. We can let them grow. We have a term of Dakota. There are no ceilings at Dakota. So that's a really big part of Dakota.

KEVIN NEAL: That's good. You don't find many companies with that type of philosophy. There's always a ceiling level to many organizations. And you don't get past that, unless you leave that organization.

GUI COSTIN: Yeah. Yeah. And that's why it's the job of the leader to find those opportunities, to create those opportunities. And so it's a real pressure on a CEO, in a good way. Because the leader has to step up. And they have to create business opportunities; they got to create new things. So you don't want to lose those good people. Because why in the world does, I always say, it's like, why do you bring someone on board, treat them like gold? They learn how to do a job, get the job done, or took them truly 10 hours to do something, takes them an hour, takes them 30 minutes, takes them 10 minutes, so they developed this

institutional knowledge. Why do you want them to leave? They have all this knowledge. Why would you ever want your best people to leave. Your job is to keep the best people and create opportunities for them. That's the job of a leader. And not going to say it's easy, but that's the responsibility you have.

KEVIN NEAL: Yeah. But you have a lot of corporate jobs, where it's not up to, per se, just the individual that's over them, or their supervisor, or their immediate lead, but it's up higher level. And how do we get to that portion, where we say, ok, this CEO level, and I'm talking about 5,000, 10,000 people corporations, how do we get to the place, where we at least get the CEOs to understand that they need to implement something that will help to not funnel out people but to bring people into this place and keep them there?

GUI COSTIN: Yeah. So yeah, it's a super complex question, because you're just dealing with, it really comes down to the leadership of the CEO, and how they've set up their infrastructure, and what their core principles, the principles they stand for. So put it this way, I didn't get the concept of core principles until they're doing this one exercise. And we always had Dakotaisms. We grow apples, we sell them to apple buyers. We're not trying to convince orange buyers to buy apples. We're not in the convincing business.

Throw your hat over the wall. Walk the eight feet. Don't go cowboy. Be a master messenger. Turn your brain off. All these Dakotaisms, because they were trying to tap into the collective knowledge of the group. So the guy's like, ok, so what do you guys stand for? And we're like, teamwork, friendship, all this stuff. And I'm like, dude, what are you trying to get at? He's like, I'm trying to come up with what's unique to you. And I said, we've got these things called Dakotaisms. And I started reading them off. He goes; those are your core principles. That's what you stand for.

So what dawned on me at that moment was that if a CEO of a 5,000 or 10,000-person company clearly defines what they stand for, and if one of your core principles are... there are no ceilings at XYZ company, then everybody that joins

the company has to buy into the core principles. And if you leave them, then they're like, OK, I got to find opportunities for my team. I'm a leader of this team. I got to find opportunities. So it comes down to my advice is... you have to define what you stand for. They call them standards, core principles. It's what you stand for. And you have to define it in your words, that would only mean something to the employees of the company, so it's unique to the company. And then do you stand for upward mobility or not? If you do, then that's important. Make it a core principle. Do you know what I mean? And I think those core principles have done more for me as a leader than really anything.

Because I can always point back, hey, you violated a core principle, you want cowboy. You didn't walk eight feet. What walk the eight feet mean? Officers separated by eight feet. That guy or that girl, the woman in other office has so much knowledge. All I have to do is get up and ask. That's another core principle... ask. If you don't ask, you won't get. So yeah. So I think, core principles are a really keyway to get at that answer.

KEVIN NEAL: Ok. Walk me through some of the core principles of Dakota. I mean don't have to tell me all of them, but...

GUI COSTIN: No, no. They're very important to us. So for instance, when you're in sales, some people, for whatever reason, are just not going to be a buyer. And some people, oh, I'm not going to take no for an answer. And one of our first core principles said, hey, team, this is the deal. We grow apples, and we sell them to apple buyers. We don't try to convince orange buyers to buy apples. We're not convincing business.

The second one is, don't go cowboy. So put any opportunity that you're working on or something, a problem that you have, in front of the whole group, so you can tap into the collective knowledge that can help you collectively solve the problem. A lot of people are paralysis by analysis. So I call it, turn your brain off. They overthink stuff.

A similar related concept is, throw your hat over the wall. Now, some people are scared to ask for things, so we had to make a core principle... ask. If you're not asking, you're not going to get. So it all comes back to what the desired outcome is. So all the core principles are going after the desired outcome. And as I said before, desired outcome, one of the most important things is communication and tapping into the collective knowledge of an organization, that's paramount... taking risks, not overthinking stuff, and not wasting time. You'll love this one. So as I said, I'm a salesman at heart. I said to the sales team, one day, I said, look, I'm the biggest BSer on the planet, ok? So just don't try to BS a BS, ok? Because I can see right through it. So three weeks later, we're in the office, we're in our sales meeting. We live in Philadelphia. He goes on, well, right now, I'm scheduling for meetings in LA, three weeks from Friday. I'm like, really? Whose wedding are you going to? How do you know I was going to a wedding? I'm like, who schedules meetings in LA on a Friday afternoon when you live in Philly? Ok. In Philly, you want to go on the company's dime, to a wedding. He goes, how did you know that? I'm like, dude, stop. Ok. And I'm fine with you going, just don't try to mask it like it's not something. When you start to uncover that, and that people then know, oh, ok, we're focusing on the things that matter most. This guy is not tolerating any stuff that doesn't focus on things that matter most. That's one of our core principles... focus on what matters most. Then once you get that, they don't act weird. And I'm kind to everybody, so everyone else is kind to one another. And so we were really amazing collegial work environment.

KEVIN NEAL: Ok. Well, tell me about Gui's story. How did you get to where you are? How did you get to the place where you have these principles ingrained in you? What did you go through? What type of life did you come through in order to develop these?

GUI COSTIN: So I mean, I grew up, lots of divorce, but love my mom and stepfather, they're awesome. My dad died in '03, but he was an extremely difficult guy and very crazed in his own way. My grandfather wasn't very nice to him. And it just came out of him. And so it was just a lot of demeaning, poking fun, making

fun of you, the whole thing that we didn't live too close together. And that really, at the end of the day, that beat down, if you will. It's not an excuse in any way, shape, or form, but that really, it's defined me. And then I'm crazy independent, probably, because of that. And so in fact, when I took a personality test, they had 10 different tests. One test was a test of independence. And one was, you were the least independent. And 29 was the most independent. I scored 33. I scored off the charts on the score.

And the guy looks at me, and I have not been divorced, he goes, I just don't why you haven't been divorced three or four times, because this makes no sense.

But it's been an evolutionary process of a lot of lessons learned, a lot of mistakes along the way, trying not to make the same mistakes, but there's clearly no perfection. But the point that you made is having some self-awareness. Listen, I'm the most imperfect person that you'll ever meet. And I'm just trying to get better every single day, and evolve, and have that self-awareness. But it really, really comes from that. And since day 1, when I was 18, I wanted to have my own business. It was always a dream of mine. And I really wanted to have a company that we could bring people in and have them build their careers for a long period of time. That was always a vision. I don't think we'll hit this vision, but I always had the vision of downtown Philly. There'd be the name of the company on a building. And people would come in, and they'd start their careers, they'd stay with you. And we've really achieved that goal with a lot of longevity, which has been a lot of fun. And then also, another core principle is... have fun. And you come to work; you want to have fun. And you want to play at the highest level. So it really is fun. Today, one thing that chat and LLMs have really made possible is for you to do blog posts about problem solution and identifying different problems that your customers have.

Then through the post, talk about ways to solve that problem or address it, what to overcome. And then hopefully, you have a solution that your product or service actually can assist in that. But you're able to create very detailed, accurate blog posts in 60 seconds, 122 minutes. You know what I mean? And so what that

means is, you can push out content that helps people ask questions of Google and LLM and get really good answers back. And then potentially, you have a product or solution that can help solve that problem. And I believe it's going to be as long as it's legit. If you do have those products, you can bring information out differently than on a website, because a website is a little bit more marketing copy, whereas blog posts should really be problem solution. Top five myths about selling into this channel, five biggest obstacles a private equity investor has in their day-to-day basis about sourcing deals. You know what I mean? And then you have those answers.

KEVIN NEAL: So you have been the CEO. When you created Dakota, how long ago?

GUI COSTIN: 19 years, 2006.

KEVIN NEAL: Ok. Tell me this... when did you get your first big win that you knew, this is what I'm supposed to be doing, this is where it's at?

GUI COSTIN: Well, there's no doubt that it was some amazing people in the state of Michigan, in Detroit that really, we had our first product. Well, one person that I'm still friends with, dear friend of mine today, was the first investor in one of the funds that we market. Never forget him. And then there's two others that really made it all work. And I'll be forever indebted to them. So I don't want to name names right now. If they're listening to this, they would know. But I vividly remember it in the fall of '06 and the spring of 2007, in the summer of 2007, it was those wins that really got the business off the ground.

KEVIN NEAL: Ok. Ok. Now, when you talk about... and you were just speaking of some people that connected with you, that helped you to get to those places, what is the best piece of advice that you have been given since you started the business? Well, not just since you started the business, in life. Let me put it that way, in life.

GUI COSTIN: Put it this way. It's very easy. And I came up with this in 2011, five years into the business. I made it my mission to help other people get what they want out of life, our employees and our customers. And that's it, help other people get what they want out of life. And that's the only thing. That's being of service, day in and day out, serving people, helping people, not making it about you, making it about other people. Because if you do that, you'll do fine in life. But if you make it too much about yourself, or the transaction, or the sale, add value, help other people.

KEVIN NEAL: Right. Now, I know you mentioned earlier about some mistakes that you made during the transition and so forth. And I believe this... I believe that there's no mistake that we make that's a true mistake, unless we don't learn from it. If you don't learn from it, then yeah, it was a mistake. But if you learn from it, it helps us to increase our goals, to increase the direction that we're going in. And it helps us to become who we are. So I think that there's no mistake that is truly a mistake, unless we don't learn from it. But let me ask you this... I know you've taken some risks in building your business. Tell me about one risk that really sticks out to you, that you took, that really panned out good for you.

GUI COSTIN: Well, I had this idea to do a product at my former firm in the spring of 2006. I pitched to the CEO, he loved it. I pitched it, then he goes, go pitch the executive committee at our next board meeting. So I pitched the executive committee. They not only say no, but they fire me after months.

KEVIN NEAL: Wow. Wow.

GUI COSTIN: So then I called up the partner that I had sourced to go help us build this product. And I said, hey, these guys don't want to do it. You want to do it with me? And they said, sure. Turns out, my boss ended up coming along, and that was the big risk. And then we basically risked everything to start the business in the fall of 2006.

KEVIN NEAL: Wow, that's an amazing story. I want to ask, now, we have leaders who are difficult. And sometimes, just for the sake of, and I mentioned this earlier, not saying yes, they'll say no, no particular reason, just because they want to say no. How do we deal with situations where we're in a place, where a leader who has direction over us, who has the say so over something that we're doing, something that we're implementing doesn't get it, doesn't really hear what we're saying, and we're seeming like on different wavelengths.

GUI COSTIN: Just try to really understand where they're coming from. So that's the classic. If they're saying no, don't make this an excuse to you, which a lot of people do like. Well, they don't let me do whatever I want to do. And then that becomes a spiral for your career, where it's always that other person is in my way. For the most part, people like ideas. But listen, sometimes, you have to look yourself in the mirror, and you really got to check the veracity of your idea. Because you might say they're saying no, but you got to seek to understand why they're saying that and ask them in a very respectful way. It's like, look, I told you I'm fine. No. But would you mind, because I really want to make sure I check myself, I need to check myself, am I messing up somewhere? And I think that's really, really important. What am I missing in this conversation? Because a lot of times, they're not going to tell you the reason they're saying no, they're just going to say no. So seek to understand, do it respectfully. Say, look, I'm not trying to convince you. I'm not trying to change your mind. I'm just trying to understand. Because a lot of times, people are like, hey, dude, look, I need you to go do this job, because a lot of people come up with ideas to avoid pain. So you have to be very careful that making it all about you and your idea. And so I think that's how, seek to understand. Don't try to convince them. Seek to understand why they're saying what they're saying. And I think you're going to end up learning more if you seek to understand, than you will even if they said yes. Because for the most part, if people have ideas that are really in their best interest, the company's best interest, and it's like the right thing to do, they're not going to say no. That's a whole other conversation. But that's what, seek to understand.

KEVIN NEAL: That is so good. That is so good, because I think that, often, if we have an idea or we have a process or what have you that we think is right, so often, we'll be so stuck on being right that we completely miss understanding what the other person is trying to say. And I think when we try to get to that place where I'm understanding why you said what you said, if you said no, I'm trying to understand why you said no, then it helps me to step back and reevaluate. So yeah, I think that's so good. So tell me about Dakota. What is the difference in Dakota and any other organization out there?

GUI COSTIN: Culture. It's how we treat one another, plain and simple. It's a kind culture that's ridiculously hard charging, but we do it with kindness. And our culture separates us completely from the pack. And I work really, really hard on it. And culture comes down to how you treat people. How you treat people comes down to the words that come out of your mouth and your tone of voice, but even more importantly, the words that you use. And it could even be one word that ruins someone, one little flippant comment that you make or whatever it might be. And so I work really, really hard talking about culture all the time, and living it, breathing it every day. And I know it's difficult, sometimes, to bring in people from the outside with that culture ingrained in them already. So how do you build that culture within those that you bring in?

Once people know what the rules of the game are, they either play by the rules, they throw voted themselves off the island. And for the most part, as long as they're clear and I go through all the core principles of what we stand for and how we treat one another, it's like, ok, I got it. So that behavior is not permissible. So yeah. And people learn very, very quickly. We really haven't had a personnel issue in years because of that. Everyone just knows what the rules are. And by the way, the rules aren't bad. Ok, I want you to come in. I want you to be kind to your teammates, but I want you to work really hard and get after it. And the CEO is going to remove every obstacle for you in order to get your job done. It's like, ok, what can I complain about that?

KEVIN NEAL: I know that sales and finance is really a hard-charging business. But when you talk about bringing in that culture, and I know we spoke about your core principles, have you found it difficult to find people who are willing to go along with those core principles, especially coming from that background? Really.

GUI COSTIN: Nope. Ok, no, not at all. Not at all in any way, shape, or form. Because during the interview process, we are able to figure that out during the interview process. And it's intensely super easy.

The one thing I will say is that, for our sales team, we only really want one type, which, really, it's a division I athlete, right, because there's so much rejection that division I athletes are just told they suck, by their coaches, for 11 years. And that means they develop some unbelievably thick skin, it's part of their DNA in terms of being told you suck, and having to grind, and get up early, and lift, and work your butt off.

And we talk about it so much. And in general, we've had people that we've interviewed people. And I go through the whole culture excitement. And they just are like, nope, no interest. Thanks.

KEVIN NEAL: Yeah.

GUI COSTIN: That's good. You just get it out of the way upfront.

KEVIN NEAL: Right. Right. Right. And you weed people out. But sometimes, people get through the weeding process, don't you think? And you find out later on that they may have looked the part or acted the part at the interview, but you find out, when you get them in there, that it's something totally different.

GUI COSTIN: Yeah. And I think one question I thought you were about to ask just about truly lessons learned. I'd say, the biggest lesson learned, maybe top five, because culture is probably the most important thing, core principles, but

then also hiring A players. So A's won't hang out with A's. So it really is the deal. And you really want to be careful because lions want to hang out with lions, and zebras want to hang out with zebras, and B's want to hire C's. Boy, oh, boy, that's number 1, you want to find the A's. And I'd only go for the A's and create an environment that an A wants to be part of. That's the key thing.

That's what, sometimes, leaders don't understand is that, if you're going to demean people or think you're being funny, and tell stupid jokes or poke fun at someone's outfit or do... oh, when I call one of our sales guys at Friday at 1:30, I'm like, hey, I just want to touch base. He's like, I'm on the second hole, I'm playing golf. I'm like, oh, hit him great, have fun. I'll catch you up on Monday. A lot of bosses are like, oh, must be nice. I'm here, grinding in the office, and you're playing golf. And that just crushes someone's soul. You know what I mean? So you just have to be careful with those words.

KEVIN NEAL: So yeah, I think you said something that's very key, is creating the environment where people want to be, where people feel like they're valued, feel that they can really become everything that they are intended to become. And I think that that's one thing that when you create that environment, you don't have to worry about the type of people that you bring in, because they'll want to be there. So yeah, I think that's very important. Our time is running short, but I want to ask you one more question. Tell me, what advice would you give your younger self, your 19, 20-year-old self? What advice would you give that Gui?

GUI COSTIN: Well, if you're doing a business, definitely hire A players. Surround yourself with the most knowledgeable the people that you can. And just make sure you're surrounding yourself by people that can really help you. And then find people that are really in your corner. And what I mean by that is, if you're sharing your life experiences with, and then they're listening, and they're willing to give you feedback. Or just check you, it's like, look, I've got this idea, I was going to do this. And they're like, I don't know dude. Are you sure you want to do that? That kind of thing. So I think, really surrounding yourself with people more talented than you are, seek those people out. Like I said, A's hang out with A's.

And that's you surround yourself with super high-quality people that share your same values.

KEVIN NEAL: Yeah, that's some great advice. So lastly, how can our listeners get in touch with you? How can they find out what you're doing and maybe partner with you?

GUI COSTIN: Well, if you'd like me to send you a signed copy of my most recent book for free, just send me an email to gui@dakota.com. And then you can find out a lot about me and the company at dakota.com. And yeah, I'm extremely public. We do a lot of social media, a lot of video, a lot of interviews, a lot of podcasts. So we're out there, and we'd love to help. And I'd love to get the book out there. My book is called The Dakota Way, my second book. And it's a sales book on how to raise money, the four core principles. It's really the only book out there on fundraising, so it's a fun read.

KEVIN NEAL: Great. Great. Well, Gui, this has been a wonderful conversation. Glad to have you with us. And hopefully, you'll be able to come back to us another time later on, maybe later on this year.

GUI COSTIN: I'd love to. Thanks for having me.

KEVIN NEAL: All right. Thank you. And we end, as we always do, the secret to success is not doing the right things but becoming the right person, the real you. Join me in becoming someone better. Thank you. And we'll see you next week.

GUI COSTIN: All right.