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# How to Build Unconventional Cultures that Thrive

WITH GUI COSTIN

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**The Strategic Counsel**  
**by ForthRight Business Podcast**

**ANNE CANDIDO:** Welcome to the Strategic Counsel by ForthRight Business podcast. If you're looking for honest, direct and unconventional conversations on how to successfully lead and operate in business, you are in the right place. In our discussions, we push on the status quo and traditional modes of thinking to reveal a fresh perspective. This unlocks opportunity for you, your team, and your business. Now let's get to it. Welcome to the Strategic Counsel podcast. I am Anne Candido.

**APRIL MARTINI:** And I am April Martini.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** And today we're going to talk about how to build unconventional cultures that thrive. So many of our clients have been struggling, I mean, really struggling to establish cultures that serve both the people and the business. And this is dilemmas about flexible work schedules, what's being called generational gaps. Leaders are just literally throwing up their hands, trying to figure out how to motivate without micromanaging.

**APRIL MARTINI:** Yes. And we're very straightforward when it comes to culture. One of our pillars under ForthRight Business is actually organizational development. So not only will we have lots to say, but we're going to go right at what is getting in the way today in this discussion. And a bit of a spoiler alert. A good part of it is actually our own mindsets.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** Yes, that's true. And we have a special guest to help us with this. And that is Gui Costin, Founder and CEO of Dakota. Gui, It is awesome to have you for this conversation. You want to say hi to the listeners and give them a bit of your story?

**GUI COSTIN:** Thanks so much for having me. I do appreciate it. Our company's been around close to 20 years. The first part was the straight sales business for investment firms. We do sales to help them raise capital for their investment funds. And then we had about 12 people on that team, and we still do today. And that business is still thriving and doing well. And then in 2019, we made the decision to commercialize our database that we use to raise the money for those investment firms. And today we ended up hiring 65 people and counting, and have about 1,500 investment firms as subscribers and about 7,000 individuals. So a whole new, different business. That culture is really at the focal point of everything we do in the company.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** Yeah, and it's quite a diverse set of people, too, that have to build culture around. And they're coming from so many different parts of the ecosystem. So this is going to be, I think, a really good conversation to really understand not just culture within your team, but culture within the business itself. And so with that, I think let's just get started with how we titled this episode, which is How to Build Unconventional Culture. And you and I have had a little bit of a conversation about your culture and the style of it and what we call it as unconventional. And I'd love for you to talk a little bit about it really tell us about, why do you think it's needed now?

**GUI COSTIN:** Now, this is one person's opinion. Culture is how you treat people. And how you treat people has to do with the words that come out of the leader's mouth. Some people don't have a filter, and they have no discipline, so they'll say whatever they want. Others, I believe, in kindness. Now, I evolved. I wasn't always this, it was very much an evolutionary process. Because I did two startups and there's tensions and there's frustrations. But what you realize as you go along, any organization's number one goal needs to keep their best people. That's

number one. Every business is a people business. People leave jobs because they don't like their boss, generally. And that's because their boss treats them poorly or badly or what have you. And it's just so important. I can keep going on in terms of the overall effects on society and life and everything if there's a lot of job turnover. And it really does come down to the leader and how they treat everyone. Because then, everyone else is going to treat everyone else just like the leader is treating them. And you just can't have full permission to say whatever you want all the time, at least I don't think, if you want to keep your best people. The combo, though, that is very difficult, is can you maintain a very hard-charging culture of service to your customers and your teammates while doing it with kindness? We've proven you can. That, to me, is the sort of vexing question.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** Yeah, and I think it's a really good one because we talk about that fine line with our clients as well, right? About this whole idea of treating people like people, treating them humanely, all of these things and respecting them. And so totally agree with you. But then on the other side of that, the part of the conversation we're often having is around accountability. And how do you make sure that people understand their role within the organization? And like you said, are willing to charge forward, be hard-chargers in it, and really represent the clients the right way. And I think it is a tricky balance. I would just ask like, how do you manage that sort of tenuous nature, if you will? Because the other piece of what we often talk about is, it's not a set it and forget it exercise. So how do you continue to maintain that? I mean, my words, accountability, however you want to talk about it. How do you make sure that continues to happen?

**GUI COSTIN:** First off, I've treated everyone like adults. In the interview process, everybody gets it from me. And then it's like, look, this is not

going to be a place for you if you can't be accountable, if you're not a hard-charger, if you don't want to play at the highest level of professionalism. If you don't want to be the best version of yourself, it's not going to be a spot for you. And so first off, but I walk the talk. No teeny policy, no vacation policy. What I think you're asking is what I think that comes down to is trust. Do you express trust? So I just gave you two of the most biggest areas of a business that would say trust all day long or no trust. Micromanaging on expenses, I think everybody teases me all the time about those things they're, like, paid vacation days off, RPIs or RPOs or something like that. PTO. Yeah, right, PTO. I don't even know what that means because it's just like, take the time you need. I'm going to trust you to get your job done. Now, if you can't get your job done, it's a very short leash. And so you need to attract people that look around and want to act like adults. But you can't treat them like children and expect them to act like adults. Right? So it's a two-way deal. You know what I'm saying? And it's amazing, you have young kids, I have kids, two out of college, just out of college. And I kind of took the tact because my dad was a very judgmental dude. Like crazy, crazy, crazy, judgmental, like everything. So I just did the opposite. And it really defines my leadership style. Because I'm like, look, I don't want to be judged and teased and the whole thing. And so I'm not going to do that. I'm going to treat you like an adult. I'm going to expect you to get your job done. It's going to be very transparent. But in-between, there's going to be a lot of love. And we're going to have a lot of fun. Because I have to love everyone I work with, that's 80-plus people. And I have to have fun. We have to have fun together. Because you spend more time at work than you do with your family. What do you see when your kids get to be 13 or 14, and then they go upstairs and hanging out.

**APRIL MARTINI:** I don't see them ever.

**GUI COSTIN:** Yeah.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** Or they can drive and you never, definitely never see them ever.

**GUI COSTIN:** Right? It's the rite of passage. And I love hanging out with my kids. And I really do love hanging out with the team and building something together and watching them grow. And it's a little bit shades of gray. You can't work eight straight hours a day. We have gym memberships for everybody that we pay for. And we expect they get out of the office and walk around and hang out, have conversations, stuff like that. But the goal at the end of the day, look, we got to execute. We got to get the job done. I'm not a wilting lily. So it's kind of like, but I'm not a jerk about it. And now I'm not going to say that in the old days of the locker room when we started, a bunch of ex-lacrosse players and athletes, that I was a little bit more abrupt in my patience level. I still have a serious impatience level, but I do it with kindness. And I think the most important thing is they're too tied together. People have to know that you've got their back. And you're there to take care of them. Like, that's why a CEO has to have an open-door policy. A CEO has to feel like anybody can come to them with an issue, with a question. Can you remove this obstacle for me? And I do it every single time because that's my job. My job is to remove obstacles and help people. And they have to know that I'm there for them. And I want them to be growing their career.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** All right. There's so much to unpack. All right. I'm going to try to start someplace and go and flow this, so it doesn't just become very overwhelming. Because you said a lot of really wonderful things that I want to dig into. The first thing that I want to really

highlight, the point where you said culture starts at the top. It is basically leader-defined. And I think this is a really tough thing for a lot of leaders to wrap their mind around. Because they will say, well, the culture is all of us. And I and April will say, well, yes, it's all of the people that are going to be part of the culture that's going to help to bring the culture to life. But one person has to define the culture. They need to decide what the business or the team or the category or whatever your purview is going to stand for, and how that, call it whatever it is, we'll call it team or your business, is going to operate or how they're going to operate. What are the expectations? What are the operating principles? How are we going to behave and act and treat each other? So I think that's a really, really important point. So I want to rewind back to that a second and really talk to you about, how did you define that for yourself? You mentioned a little bit about your dad and how you did not want to be. And I think there's probably some element of experience there. But like, how did you decide that this is the kind of culture I wanted to create?

**GUI COSTIN:** I have to love everyone I work with. I realized in 2011 very vividly because I put it on our website. I realized that I needed to make it about everyone else, not about me. And so my mission at that point was to help other people get what they want out of life. And I was in my early, mid-40s. And I guess a lot of people said that's when the epiphany kind of happens. And I realized that. And I dedicated the whole business to exactly that, helping other people get what they want out of life. And what you said about, what do we stand for? So standards, right? That's the same way. It's the same concept. What are your standards? What do you stand for. And you have to define that on a daily basis. Those are your core principles. If you go through our office upstairs, we have a hallway that's 20 feet long on both sides, and it's a mural of all of our Dakotaisms, which are our core principles. And it's

like, what do you stand for? And, of course, you stand for probably honesty and integrity and all that stuff. But it needs to be defined more deeply in the words and the phrases you use internally. We were talking earlier about the Eagles and the Cowboys, and just think about leadership as a coach. And think about the teams in the NFL that win. And then look at the front office.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** Ouch.

**GUI COSTIN:** Look at the head coach. Right? I mean, come on.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** It's a pretty telegraphic point. That's hitting home. That's hitting home.

**GUI COSTIN:** Dan Snyder? Dan Snyder with the Washington Redskins or Commanders, I mean, are you kidding me? I mean, look, they never won. As soon as they put Josh Harrison, he brings in the guy, the total leader from the Warriors. And they completely turned the culture around in one year.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** Well, not to mention you took our best defensive coordinator. We've had him so many years and made him their coach. And then they won. And I mean, oh, that was rough. That's really rough. God, that still hurts.

**GUI COSTIN:** But my point is look at the Philadelphia Flyers. Haven't been the Stanley Cup and everything. Were owned by a corporation, right? Who's going down and making sure they have the best talent? Whatever their culture is, that's how you treat people. When the Mavericks were owned by Mark Cuban, he did things for that team that most owners wouldn't do. He took care of his players. His players knew



he had their back. He supported them. So my point is that I think it's what you're saying. It's what you stand for. It all comes from the top and it can't come from anywhere else. And sometimes it can come from a very rarely is it a horrible home office or front office and then a coach. But we've had an amazing owner sort of rub it in for the Eagles. But Jeffrey Lurie's been an unbelievably consistent owner for 30 years. I mean, year in and year out, I mean, it's been quite extraordinary. And I see the results and it's crazy. But yeah, and I do take this very seriously because I'm playing with fire. People come into the office and they're treated a certain way, you're playing with fire. You're playing with people's lives, their emotions, their families. They come home. How was your day at work? You know, he's a complete jerk. He's an ass. He said this. He said that. Things can happen. It actually happened a lot more earlier on in the six years of this last business, when we just didn't hire the right people. No one's fault. It just wasn't a good fit. And now that we've gotten more to the fit, if you will, across the board, very low HR stuff, very low turnover. In fact, we're just hiring another customer service manager. She's awesome. And I looked at the team. I'm like, man, you guys have set a ridiculously high bar. Because it's, like she found us on LinkedIn. Came in, we're like, OK, that's for the team. It was like, OK. In all likelihood, unless she just really doesn't like it, she's going to end up being very successful. So over time, right? And then also, A's like to hang out with A's. You can have diversity, which we do if you look at from across the board. We have more female leaders in big roles running teams, if you will, than we do male leaders, just to give you one for instance. But that's really, really important that you get the fit right. And then you only hire for the right fit. If you're just hiring to hire because I want to have this look in a certain way, that's a recipe for disaster. Then there's no cohesiveness of the people. You have to share common characteristics, common things you all believe in. And by the way, it's across the board how you treat people, whether it's your

barista. We have a legendary doorman down in our building here in downtown Philly, Eddie. I mean, he is the king. He comes to our Christmas parties. I mean, it's like, you know what I mean? Yeah, he's the king. He's everything you'd ever want in that role. And we love him and take care of him. And he's just awesome. And he's just the biggest character of all time. Meaning the love of kindness there. It kind of goes across everything. And then how you treat your customers, your responsiveness, all those things. But then it becomes like a flywheel. Then everyone just knows the expectation is, wow, heads roll if we don't respond in five minutes. Now, I don't take out an ax and run around the office screaming and yelling. But everyone's very, very clear that if you're not responsive, just is not going to be a good place for you to work. You can go work somewhere else. But we have customers who take care of and we're showing insane disrespect if we're not responsive. And if we're in business to take care of people and serve, we got to be responsive. And that's OK if you don't believe in that. But this is not the spot for you, so.

**APRIL MARTINI:** Yeah. I mean, the way we talk about and sum up a lot of what you said is we talk about the culture being defined, like Anne said, from the top down. Totally agree with that. And then that you have to hire, fire, and evaluate based on that. And so you had a lot of good points and examples in what you just said, everything from this new person coming on to the way that the team holds each other accountable, and then you hold them accountable. And then the idea of having it on the walls in the office is the other piece where clearly you're not one of these. But we also have other places where people put it on the walls, but then it's never actually activated. And so I would love if you could talk to us a little bit about a peek behind the curtain of whether it's in an interview situation, how do those go real time to make sure you're getting the right people in the right seats? Or, as you're

working together every day, how are you making sure people are holding each other accountable and then you're able to do that? I mean, you have another job. You have the overall job of being the owner of the company. And then also, when it's time to depart from people, kind of making sure that kindness continues, because you're also totally right. Your reputation is outside the walls of the organization for sure, whether it's people's families if they're unhappy, or if they depart. And what are they saying about you when they go out the door? So I would love to just hear a little bit more about how you take what's on those walls and you instill that in people from the minute they are interviewing with you all the way through to their tenure with you, and even after it's time for them to go.

**GUI COSTIN:** Yeah, so when I just interviewed Kate, we sat down, had a conversation. And I heard her backstory, learned everything about her. We were already going to hire. I knew going in. And then I just went right into the culture. And I said, the thing you have to know is culture and kindness. And then the Dakotaisms. And then she had known a few of them. A lot of people go on to our website and look at them. And then everybody who joins the company gets a personal bio video done right here where I'm sitting right now. And our videographers interview them, ask them, let's say 7, 8, 9 questions. One of them is, what is your favorite Dakotaism? And then they said, that means, obviously, they know ahead of time. They study them, everybody knows them. And then the simplest thing is we basically had an office that's let's say 10 by 10. And then across the way, we took the space. And so we knocked down that wall, which was another office of 10 by 10. So it created a hallway, two charcoal-colored walls. And we have an awesome graphic designer and so on. So I said, someone, let's do a mural wall. So she designed both sides. And you can design them and then they will enlarge them and print them and then hang them like wallpaper.

**APRIL MARTINI:** Yep.

**GUI COSTIN:** And so we did that. But we talk about them all the time. And now there's been moments when the first group that I trained up, like my brothers, and they started going cowboy. That's don't go cowboy. One Dakotaism meaning you want to tap into the collective knowledge of the group. Another Dakotaism that's the sister to that one is, walk the 8 feet. So in all likelihood, if you're in an office and you're 8 feet away from the other office door, and that person has an insane amount of knowledge, OK. But most people don't go in and are like, hey, Joe. Susan, hey, I have a question for you. I'm working on this. I'm working on that. Any thoughts? So you have all this knowledge around the company, but if you're not walking the 8 feet and interacting and asking questions of your teammates, tapping into their collective knowledge, and then they're tapping into yours, you're missing out. So we're always trying to press. And the Don't Go Cowboy is where someone holds back information until they ride out in their big, white horse. And they're like, oh, I'm working on a \$50 billion deal. This is amazing. And then literally it happened. It happened to Dakota. And everyone got so quiet. And the new guy is like, what? He's looking around and they're all just like, dude. And they knew. They knew, they knew. It was like, it was over. I'm like, you were literally taking a knife out, OK, and slicing it in my heart of what we try to do as a team. Because we want to win as a team. And if you're not going to tell the team what you're working on, then the team can't help you. Because the team could say, hey, you know what? I just I had that problem yesterday. I was literally in New York City in a meeting, and that person brought this up. This is how I answered the question. I mean, you have this whole team around you. And so it sounds very intuitive, but it's really not. And it's not. And so you really got to constantly discuss it.

The communication thing is, by far and away, after culture. Pulling, getting people to pull information out of themselves and say it, share it with the team, that was our theme yesterday of our W days. We have monthly W days. What's working, what's not working? People call them off-sites. You sit down with a 7-person team. The other people come in, no preparation. What's working? What's not working? How can we help solve any problem that you have in front of you?

**ANNE CANDIDO:** I think the thing I want everybody to hear is that these principles by which you're building the culture are principles that you guys live by. And I think so many people are so wrapped up in the traditional ways of operating, call it the corporate environment or however you want to define it, that culture has to be a certain way. And I think what you're kind of blowing the lid off of is that culture can be whatever you define it, as long as you define it and you put the principles in place, and people can actually internalize the principles, they practice the principles, and then you're hiring for those principles. And I think the really interesting thing that you said was that you knew that you were going to be hiring Kate even before she came in. Like, you'd already looked at her credentials, likely. You'd already looked at her skills. You might have already checked out her references. What you were really looking for was a culture fit. Am I wrong in saying that?

**GUI COSTIN:** Yeah, 100%. We also had we needed to stop bringing people in that then eventually didn't make it through. And we should be able to do enough work ahead of time where there's a 95% success. We have to really, I can't, because of HR, I can't name situations. But in the past six months, there's been situations where someone walks in and I'm like, we have a huge open area, a huge kitchen, soaring ceilings. And I'm like, oh man, we should have known. That's not good for that person. It's not good for us. It's just not a cultural fit. We can tell immediately, you

know what I mean? And it has nothing to do with color of someone's skin or anything like that. It was just you could just tell that immediately. It just like, I just know our culture. If you walked around, it's a lot a lot of similar-type people, similar ambitions, similar goals, similar ways of being. You know what I mean? There's a lot of shared way of conducting yourself. And listen, we know there can be much more sharp-elbowed firms, where it's like that's where that type of personality goes to work. And they love it. And they all love being sharp-elbowed together. And that's their thing. That wouldn't be for me. You know what I mean? Like, I couldn't work in an environment like that. I'm not saying we have a perfect environment. I'm just saying we've created this sort of similar shared values and way of behaving, way of treating each other, a lot of these people, they don't have to do this. But a lot, tons of them hang out after work together because they're kind of in their 20s and 30s and they just get along, they're shared values. They have a lot of fun together. So that just makes work. why can't work be a blast?

**ANNE CANDIDO:** And then how do you screen an interview for that? How do you take that and what have you learned through those missteps? Because you said, I just know. There must be some way that you screen for it, then. Is it through a person's resume? Is it in the way they behave? Is it in questions do you ask, or is it in a certain style of interviewing process you do? Can you give us any of some of the nitty gritty tangibles? If somebody is listening and like, I want to do what Gui's doing, tell me how to go do that.

**GUI COSTIN:** Yeah, I mean, if you're talking specifically hiring, hiring is very, very complex because you're dealing with human beings. It's very, very complex and personalities and really trying to see if this is going to be a fit. And there's the old adage, hire slow, fire fast. I mean, the firing fast part is a disaster. You'd rather be able to try to diagnose it up front.

We've learned a lot along the way, and I think we're way more patient now. And there can be, in a startup kind of mode, there can be an impatience around, oh, no. We really need to fill this role. And what I think we realized is that, no, no, no, no, no. No. No, we don't. It's not worth it. It's three to six months. And we've had some very good scenarios. And I was never trying to be mean to anyone, but it's like, look, this is just not going to be a fit. You're going to leave after three to six months. It's going to be frustrating. You know those Expedia commercials where you're going to book it and then they have to show you what the whole thing is going to be like. And then you're like in the Grand Canyon and everyone's getting killed kind of thing? And then you come back and you extrapolate out three to six months. And you just have to be incredibly impatient. And then also not. You almost have to take the, now, this doesn't make sense. Versus, I'm like an internal optimist. I want everybody to win. I want to hire everybody. I want to like everybody and that whole thing. But then the other thing that hasn't really been said, but the importance of the interaction effect amongst teammates employees.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** Yes, we did that at P&G. We have what we call, the recruit would meet with several people from the team. And we would call them informal, like, project talks or whatnot. But it was really for that person on the team to assess whether or not, can you talk to this person? This person seemed interesting. Do you think this could be a good member on your team? So we drove a lot of that interaction as well, just to try to get that sense outside of a formal interview process.

**GUI COSTIN:** And it ends up being a win for everybody because this is much more about the personality behind the eyes than it is anything else on the outside. It really is. The brain, the personality, the attitude, the whole thing. And then there's shared values, right, amongst an

organization, every organization. But then it's not really an organization if there's no shared values. And then people want to be part of something that they kind see themselves as being part of and they can contribute. And so I think getting that. But that's not easy. I mean, I've made so many mistakes and I feel badly over the course of time. And I feel really badly. It could also just be not a bad attitude, but we have a umbrella concept of our core principles. It's the umbrella that everything sits beneath. It's called focus on what matters most. And then implied in that is, focus what you can control. If you really break that down, you can't end up having back door meetings or politics because you're not focused on what matters most. Because if you establish the priorities of what matter most, then you're not doing any of that stuff that doesn't matter. And not everybody buys in. Not everybody can get the bullseye on the dartboard of that concept. Sometimes there are one or two rings outside. And that's almost just too far to really make it here. To make it here, you really have to be either on the bullseye or, if you're on the fringe, you're not going to be as successful as somebody who's on the bullseye, that knows exactly what that means and that can just focus on those things that matter most.

**APRIL MARTINI:** Yeah, well, I think the balance, and I can hear it as you're talking of how tough all of this gets, but even in the beginning, when we talked about the tenuous balance of the hard-charger and the caring nature. And to me, that really is the bullseye crux. And I think having the emotional intelligence to be able to flex those things in proper proportions as you're going through exercises to solve problems. Because we are totally with you. I mean, we talk to clients all the time about somebody looking really great from that achievement basis. Right? They've accomplished all these things. They do really well in the job and all of that. And then having this culture piece fall away.



And what you said about on the best day, you identify it quickly and then hopefully you can kindly help them exit. On other days, it can really erode culture. Because too much emphasis is placed on that achievement basis instead of that balance of kindness and culture. And I really love what you said about, I'm not saying I have the right culture, but I think it's the intentionality by which you've made that decision, which we've been talking about all along. And the other piece is you do walk the talk. And you respect people's time as part of it. So the example of we don't bring someone in until we're pretty sure that they're going to be a fit, says to the team, I'm not going to waste your time meeting with a whole bunch of people. Because that's not the problem you're supposed to be solving today. You're supposed to be working with the clients and all of those things. However, when you bring someone in, I'm sure people are like, oh, OK, so this is worth my time. Those people that are in the bull's eye are like, yes, this is what I need to focus on now because we found someone that fits within that. And so I think it just says so much about how intentional it is, and also how clear it is for people, so that they have what we would call guardrails of how to operate. So that there is a balance of we get a lot done, but where we don't stomp on each other while we're doing it.

**GUI COSTIN:** You know, the intentionality part is spot on. I've also seen amongst the team, and this is where you have to be very, very careful. Especially as the company grows, you're bringing in more experts.

**APRIL MARTINI:** Oh, yeah.

**GUI COSTIN:** So our team knows they're very young. So I've trained most, a lot of these folks, their first job out of college. And they only know our way of doing things. And we have great longevity with these young folks who are now in their late 20s and 30s and everything. So

just imagine, you bring them in and those people are relying on them to get a job done. Either they start saying weird stuff or it's not really making sense. They're not really executing. What ends up happening is the worst, is then those people kind of retreat from giving them work and working with them on a project.

**APRIL MARTINI:** Yep.

**GUI COSTIN:** And then all of a sudden, you're like, oh, man. You've lost all trust or belief in that person. Well, I'll give him one more shot or whatever. That's another area. Or like we just have brought in three. We've created a whole research team, a news team and head of data. Very experienced people, all total workers, get it done. Then if you have the opposite of that, where it's like 10, 100x, and then everyone now wins because this person comes in and they can solve problems, they can get it done, they get the culture immediately, they're into speed, the whole thing? Then all of a sudden you're like a kid in a candy store. Now you're like, oh, my goodness. And then they're loving it because there's no bureaucracy. They're the new one on board. They're testing us to see how we're going to react to certain requests for things and all. I'm all in. Let's go. I'm all in. Let's go. Let's start good. Because they've been so spot on it's frightening. So then if you get the opposite effect of that, it's like, so freeing. It's crazy.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** Yeah. And I would be remiss if I didn't dig in a little bit. Because a lot of people are probably saying, oh, yeah, that works really well with more mature employees. Or you've had more experience who understand culture, whatever might be going on in their heads. But I think what's really interesting is that you have a very high population of younger employees. And we talked and we introduced this episode as being one of the big dilemmas that a lot of

our clients are having is what they're calling generational gap issues. Where it's like, oh, well, we just don't have the same values and we don't want the same thing. So therefore, these younger kids are impossible to manage. So I'd love if you could speak a little bit to how you've cracked that code, even in the midst of having a very unconventional culture. Which, at first listen, may be like, oh, that doesn't feel like a culture. Maybe Gen Z-ers or Millennials or any of these new younger people coming up are going to really appreciate.

**GUI COSTIN:** Both my sons and my daughter, both my sons played college lacrosse. One's still playing. And so I've gotten to know all their friends very, very well. And when we started the business, I hired a lot of lacrosse players to play at the Division I level at really good schools. And what you realize over time is that the basic characteristics from seventh grade and middle school, all the way through senior year in college, the resilience to make it all the way through, to be basically told you suck for 11 years straight-- and the coaches are amazing. But that's just the nature of the beast, if you will. That's that sport. It's the coaches against the team. Probably the coaches have criticized me for saying this. But at the end of the day, what they've done for these kids. I say to the kids, I said, you need to thank these coaches for the rest of your life. Truly, thank them. Because they gave you something in your DNA that is the highest quality characteristics. I'm not saying it's only lacrosse. Of course it's other sports you can get this from. But the level of resilience, teamwork, emotions... because mostly we hire them in a business development sales role, is unbelievable. And they're just great teammates and they want to work hard. And now they're having a leader that actually has insane compassion for them. Because they're sending emails, cold emails. And so a large majority of the 65 people are in that sales capacity role, let's say half. It's just easier for me to take someone who played that Division I sport, specifically lacrosse, than to

risk really anything else because that's the most important. That's the gas in the engine. If there's turnover there or it's not working or we're having to manage people or motivate them, we would not have a business. So we're just dedicated to hiring a certain type of this personality type that came from that environment. And they're unbelievable teammates. They're gentlemen. Most of these coaches hold those players to standards way higher than the average student. Meaning I know that most of the boys don't travel if they're not wearing a suit and tie. There's just a way of being around, being a gentleman and respectful. And the coaches care about the afterlife, so they really prepare them for life. And so we just don't compromise on that. I'm very close to them all. They're awesome. They're fun to be around. It's fun to watch them. There's just no tears. You know what I mean? It's just like, they're all about business. Let's go get it done. Let's smile. Let's work out. Let's have fun. But they are about getting the job done.

**APRIL MARTINI:** I love that so much. And I also love the way in which you're very unapologetic about having found it and then cultivating it. Because I think what you have found is the opposite of what Anne set up as the sort of issue with this generation. But I think it really does come down to the desire to quote unquote, "win," whatever that looks like. But the resilience piece is so huge. And I want everybody that's listening to hear that piece. Because as we run into these challenges with our clients, we also talk to them about, how do you, for example, give them questions in interviews? And you want them to light up when you say, you're going to have autonomy and be able to own your path and all of those things, not wilt. And you can see it. You can see it when you go through these interviews of how do they react to those questions. Or we'll say things like, give them this assignment that would be a real assignment that they might get early on in the job and the role that they're going to be in. And see how they do and how they think

critically and how they're able to work through that. And I think resiliency is really at the foundation of so much of these things around finding those right people. Because I think the willingness to work so hard at whether it's lacrosse or other sports, like you said, or whatever, you found that ideal profile. But it's not necessarily just that it's because they played lacrosse. It's because of the diligence by which they learned all of these fundamental life skills and the tenacity to keep coming back every time after a sales call doesn't go their way or all of that. And then also, on top of all of that, to lean into each other as part of it, I think, is huge. And so much of what we talk about is making sure that when you go to hire people, you're not just thinking about the experience and you're not thinking against them in terms of what demographic they fall into, but you really have a psychographic idea of who they are. And I have to imagine that that's why, when they walk into your office, you can almost look at them. And you were careful to say it's not about outward appearance and all of that. But that is part of it, right? They have a personal brand and a presence about them that when you see them, you just know, especially after doing it all this time, that that person is or is not what is part of the culture of your organization.

**GUI COSTIN:** Yeah. And this is the business, we hire obviously a lot of people in non-business development roles that didn't play college lacrosse. And they've been marvelously successful. So I don't want to over-lean into this. But there's another thing about that persona that doesn't ever get talked about. If the theory of life, and it's a double theory. So one, you're the average of the five people you hang out with the most. So think about that.

**APRIL MARTINI:** Oh, yeah.

**GUI COSTIN:** Right? And then Harvard did a study. And they found a cellular transfer. You actually transfer cells. That's why people repeat what you say. You know what I mean? It's like they all say the same thing you're saying because you literally transfer cells. So they've been hanging out with the most elite athletes in their domain for a very, very long period of time. So their personal friend group, if you will, are all playing at the highest level and getting along and are great teammates and are super for each other and will kill to be a great teammate. They'll also try to kill them to get on the field and take their spot. So if you think about it, it's like that friend group. Because I look at my oldest son, both my sons have phenomenal high school and college friend groups and really amazing people. And they don't suffer any fools, you know what I mean? There are certain people they want to hang out with, you know what I mean? And just that sort of get it, if you will. Well, these guys have been hanging out with 10s, 20s, 30s. These teams are 50-plus people, all these super high quality people, that they've literally just there's no other place they can go other than right to be try to become more exceptional. And then, also, the little technique that we've used. Which I say, it's not a technique. But we were just trying to create a situation where these athletes, men and women, go from one locker room. Can you send them into another locker room at work? That's a job, work versus another sport. And if you think about that for a minute, where athletes can struggle is that if, OK, yeah, I got a great job, but I'm working from home. You know what I mean? And I'm 22 and I'm used to being in the locker room. I'm used to going over training. And so we try to create, without even really giving it much thought, it was kind of simple, we just tried to create a similar atmosphere. I don't mean a locker room. No one talks like you're in a locker room. That's not even close to permissible. And I mean that. There's no joking.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** Good thing you qualified that.

**GUI COSTIN:** Yeah. There's no joking.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** Me and April wouldn't work there, then. We wouldn't be able to handle that. You can't talk like you're in a locker room.

**GUI COSTIN:** No. Yeah. And if you came into our office on the fourth floor, you'd say see, equal men and women. Everyone co-mingling, hanging out, chatting, doing the whole thing. So there's no, none of that locker room talk. But what I meant is just the concept of, what do people miss most about sports. And they'll go tell you, it's not playing. He goes, it was the times in the locker room, laughing with each other, cracking jokes, just having fun. And we tried to recreate that universally. Not just for that group, I mean universally, where it feels very warm. Not giving up the hard-charging but very warm, kind, fun, having a blast. And then trying to create the single greatest product and service you can for your customers.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** I think this is, I mean, absolutely brilliant. And I'm going to try to weave a path here because there's so much wonderful things that are being said. And I want to connect the dots for those who are listening. I mean, really at the core of this is, what does my business need from a culture and a people standpoint? And who do I want to work with? And based on that, you can really define, call it the characteristics or the modes of behavior or as you have distilled them down into Dakota-isms. What is this place going to be like in order to work here? And how are we going to be successful as a business? Right? The two have to work hand in hand. I mean, we can't have a really fun place to work and not be able to make money. And we can't have a very serious, business-like atmosphere, and nobody likes to work there. So they have to work harmoniously and synonymously together.

But then it's like, OK, who are those people? How do I define those people? Who already has those characteristics? Because as Tony Robbins says, success leaves clues. So go to where those people already exist and try to find the people who have the same makeup, the same values, the same motivations as I want within this business and the company. And I'm going to go after that. And I think even being so specific and saying, I want lacrosse players or I want Division I athletes is a very fantastic way to start to establish the profiles of, who is going to be successful here? Who do we actually want here? Because the flip side of this is, and I'd love for you to comment on this, Gui, is a lot of people will think they can fix people. Right? They'll hire what they think is right from an experience or a skill level, and they'll be like, oh, once they get in here, we're going to assimilate them in. We're going to fix them. I'm going to nurture them and coach them and mentor them up. And then they realize it's not working as well as they were hoping it was going to work. And then they wonder why the person's not motivated, the person isn't performing well. Which, at that point, me and April are like, OK, then you have to play, the other side of that was like, OK, find their currency. Try to motivate them by that currency. But then at that point, you're going outside the culture in order to fix something that shouldn't have been fixed before, or needed to be fixed if you had hired the right people. So I'd love if you could speak a little bit to that.

**GUI COSTIN:** Yeah, you basically hit the nail on the head. We're not hiring Division I lacrosse players to hire Division I lacrosse players. We need to grow the business. And in order to grow the business, we need to send cold emails. And by sending cold emails, you're going to get 1 or 2 out of 25, maybe, that they're going to respond to you and take a meeting. So that means tons of rejection. And no one went to college to come out of college to send 25 emails a day and have 1 to 2, OK? But if we don't get those two...



**ANNE CANDIDO:** Majored in rejection! I love that.

**GUI COSTIN:** OK? If we don't get those 2 out of 25, we do not have a business. So it's almost like, I know you're laughing. And I'm laughing too, but if you take it down to the most serious level, there's no business.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** Yeah.

**GUI COSTIN:** There's no business without that person doing that job. And that's why I celebrate it. That's why I'm so supportive of them. That's why we try to advance them as quickly as we possibly can into more of face-to-face sales role after 12 to 18 months. Because it is. I mean, you're asking someone to come in and get rejected all day long. All day long. And so I'm the one giving the group hug, the love, the whole thing to make sure they know that. But how many people, and we can't have a lot of turnover. Because if you're thinking about serving the customer, back to why do I exist? I exist for one reason. I want to be able to get up every morning. This is how I say it. I want to get up every morning and be able to be as creative as I can possibly be to serve our customers. Well, our teammates first. They're 1A and 1B, our customers. If I don't have the opportunity to serve, I'm not going to be happy. I love serving our customers, creating great products, solving their problems, making their work life easier. It's all one of the same concepts. Now, in order to do that, we have to put certain things in place to make that happen. And one thing we need is we need first time demos and reengaged demos set up with our targeted customer, every single day, consistently, day in and day out. Can't take a day off. Well, who do we have to hire to execute on that, right? For everybody. If the BDR stops booking meetings, everyone's out. Not just them, not just me. Everyone

loses. But I'm not going to ever risk it on that, like you said unapologetically a while ago. That's 100% the truth. I've just seen we're asking them to do the most difficult job, which is cold outreach. Pure never spoken to you before, don't ever call me again. And if you take that personally and that's your style, now, I don't know if you know lacrosse, but you get your face ripped off. You make a bad play, the coach in front of your 50 best friends in the film room, and they redo the film, and your face is fully ripped off your skull. And so by the time they get out of college, someone doesn't get back in an email, I'm like, hey, Johnny, how does that affect you? He's like, what? That person not responding to your email. He goes, I don't know what you're talking about. He said, exactly.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** That's nothing!

**GUI COSTIN:** Exactly. It's nothing. What I just went through and the whole thing? This is a can of corn. And then we really set them up as quickly as we can to have success after that. But then, all of a sudden, you have that nucleus who exudes sort of super positive energy, fun to be around, but just very stoic in their own way because they're total grinders. No tears, no apologies. None of that. Never need to be motivated. Goodness gracious, never need to be motivated. Really never. I don't know if I've ever sat a BDR down to have a conversation about performance. They've all just stepped into the role and got her done. So yeah, so I guess yeah, ability to serve. And then you need to surround yourself with a team that allows you to serve. And it's a blast to be able to do that.

**APRIL MARTINI:** Well, and I think the other piece that I want people to hear as well is you're very clear, yes, on the expectations, but also the reality of the situation you're putting them in. And so you're smart to

find the right people to sit in those roles. But then you said, I'm the cheerleader. I'm the heart behind it. So you're also helping them understand that 1 to 2 out of 25 is a big win. And also that there would be no organization if they wouldn't do this job. Right? So you are back to the very beginning, when you were talking about treating them like adults and not children. You're doing that in this way, and you're showing them that this is the business we're in. This is what needs to be done to make this business really thrive. And the rest of us rely on this BD role to do this. But I also know that while you may have thick skin, it is the reality that there aren't a lot of people that could sit in your chair and do this job day in and day out. And we appreciate you for that and we see you for that. Because I think a lot of the mistakes with those types of sales roles also is it's the opposite side of pressure where it is like beat down, it's all about the numbers. You didn't get in 52 calls today. What's wrong with you? How come you haven't closed this number? All of that kind of stuff. And then that turnover wheel just, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. So I think there's also the balance of that in the culture, the team structure, the support top-down from you, all the things we've talked about from this episode. But they feel very supported and they're part of something bigger, not like the pressure of, if I don't get this exactly right, then I'm going to be fired, for example.

**GUI COSTIN:** Yeah, we need to take the last minute and a half, I need you to cut that out and send it to every single one of your clients. That was perfectly said. Yeah.

**APRIL MARTINI:** Thank you.

**GUI COSTIN:** Yeah, that was perfectly said. And by the way, we all know that leadership style of the beat down. Most people don't get so excited

about getting rejected all day long. And so if you find a cohort that can do that, and then you support them, and then you really make it all about them and they know that, and then you give them the upward mobility. So then they can get client-facing, they can get on Zoom calls, they can be doing demos of the software. Then they're starting to feel it. They go to our, we do 30 Dakota Cocktails events a year. I send all the BDRs there. They get to interact with people. And so you give them, well, hey, this is what the future looks like. I know you're doing the yeoman's work right now. But I also say to them, too, I just want you to know, your coaches, you need to thank them for the rest of your life. And I'm literally giving you, we are giving you, the single greatest sales DNA that you could possibly have for the first 18 months of your career. It'll never leave your body. You'll never know anything different. Because you're going to see what everyone else does, and you're not going to believe it. Because you're playing at the top of the level here. You go to some other organization, they're like, what do you mean you send 25 emails? I might send three a day. And they're like, what?

**APRIL MARTINI:** Mhm.

**GUI COSTIN:** So I know also, and I know it in my heart of hearts, that we are giving them a gift in terms of the training we're giving them. So that's a good part, too. But that doesn't take away from the emotion, the rejection, all that.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** Which I think is a really good segue into one of the last points I want to get to before we wrap this up and maybe get to some rapid fire questions, is there is times when your team does not perform or they don't behave according to the way that you would like to, or according to the culture, according to Dakotaisms. How do you handle holding people accountable? How do you handle consequences

in this way, knowing that you're still trying to uphold everything that you guys just talked about, which is the support system, the making people feel like they have that person behind them that is rooting for them? How do you handle the consequences and the accountability piece on the other side of that?

**GUI COSTIN:** So this is where kind vs. nice comes into play. You can't be nice. And being kind is telling people sometimes, now, we're not here to judge or demean, right? That's not a leading strategy. But sometimes, there are absolute times where I have to take the gloves off. And it's like, look, I'm not going to do it in a broad-based thing. I don't send all company beat down emails or anything like that. It's never like that. But when there are absolutely tough conversations that I have. And I'm like, look, you know how much I love you, right? But look at what's going on right now. Are you looking at how I'm looking at it? So I try to get in their shoes to then have them see it how I'm seeing it. They're like, are you kidding me? And it's, in my opinion, my own personal style. I think it's really important that everyone knows what good looks like. And you don't compromise on what good looks like. And if I'm going to be in a situation and that's not happening, and it's like, guys, am I missing something? I love you, but this is not right. And like, what are we not seeing here. And that is absolutely part of coaching, where you do have to have the very tough love and you have to be direct. And you can't compromise on the principles, and you can't compromise on what good looks like. That's how I reference them, what good looks like. And then what ends up happening is they get trained on what good looks like. And then they see it the next time they're like, yeah, this will never work. Right? But if you're not giving that feedback, and sometimes I have to say, look. I'm so close to these guys, but it's like, I'm not judging you. I love you as a person. But it's like, dude, like, really? Like, OK, I got

you. I see what you're saying. OK, good. It's like, no judgment. Move on. I'm not here to shame you or...

**APRIL MARTINI:** Beat a dead horse. Yeah.

**GUI COSTIN:** Right? But it's like, look, I do have to point out you're attacking this way. And I'm old enough to know I know where you're going. So let's have a conversation. It happens more times than not. And so you really have to definitely enroll people. And they're like, OK, OK, OK. And then, so, our new head of data started. And the guy that did the data, Konch, has done an exceptional job. He came with no knowledge of how to do data. He led our data team for the past two years and I'm so proud of him. I tell that every single day. But we just brought in a Hall of Famer, Khizar. Khizar is unbelievable in the whole thing. So I opened up one of our data meetings and said, look, I have to have a sort of question. We have to rethink how we're thinking about this. So I said, we need to have an abundance mentality around data collection. Like anything can be collected at any time, just make the request. Whereas before, it's like, well, if we're going to do that, we're not going to be able to do this. The prioritization here, we're going to have to take this whole team off that. And that's going to slow down if we don't do this. That was kind of the deal. Well, with Khizar, he's building a whole team. That's not going to be the deal anymore. So I said, we need a full mental reset on abundance, that anything's possible at any time. We're not going to give any pushback. Well, of course I'm all in. I'm all in. Well, 10 minutes later, he goes in. I go, Konch. And he starts in. I go, Konch He goes, what? I said abundance. He goes yeah, but... I said Konch, seriously, what did we just talk about? He pauses. He starts laughing, goes, I got it. Old mindset. Old mindset. I'm like, yep. Old mindset. And even he caught himself. He caught himself. And I didn't. He knew. Because he's already seen it. And I told him this from

the beginning. He said, Khizar's going to make you so much better. But this is a mental thing. It's just a mental mindset that we have to do the switch. So you asked, like, you had, that's a really good example of a really difficult time where you just sometimes you just have to say, OK, yesterday, we were not abundance mindset on how we could collect anything at any time. No request is too much. I was like, whoa, what? We've never done that. This would have to move. We would stop doing this to do this. That was the whole thing is like, kids are on board. We're building out a team where he's from, Pakistan. So we're going to have abundance. And that now even Konch is like, OK, I'm just going to take me a little while, Gui. I said, Konch, no problem. Just wanted to point it out. Give you the distinction. The distinction of what good looks like. Good now looks like abundance. No more of not abundance. So yeah, and you just have to do it with a little humor, some fun. Never, ever teasing or demeaning or making somebody feel badly. But you do have to address the good old, pinkm or whatever you want to say, pink elephant in the room or instead of it just sitting there. You just got to address it immediately. And then always make it in their best interest. Always tell them, look, what I'm saying is in 100% your best interest. And here's how you're going to win from changing the way you think or changing the way we're doing things.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** I love it. I think that's a really great way to wrap up this episode. And before we head in and let you give us any final thoughts, are you open to some rapid fire questions?

**GUI COSTIN:** Sure, sure.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** All right. If you could ask one person one question, who would you ask and what would the question be?

**GUI COSTIN:** Wow. That's some of... Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods probably the two most inspirational athletes that I've kind of been around. I'm a golfer, I'm not a basketball player. But just their whole attitude towards competition, it would probably be just like, what was your mental attitude going into any big game? And how did you apply it to overcome any fears?

**ANNE CANDIDO:** I love it. All right. If you could make one shift on the Eagles, you make one change, what would it be and why? This was not on the list prior to the episode. Here we are.

**GUI COSTIN:** Oh, my goodness. I mean, I just don't want to lose any of our... we might have just lost to a linebacker. I mean, I love our defense. Obviously we love the offense. We love our defense. I'm sort of in love with those guys. So in love with their attitude and the whole thing. There's probably nothing I would do to change that team. I'd leave it to Howie and the pros to figure that one out.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** Yeah, well, if I could ask myself the question for the Cowboys, I'd ask the owner to fire the GM.

**GUI COSTIN:** We've known that for a long time.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** It's my favorite meme. It never gets old. OK, so the last one. What are you reading right now or what are you listening to?

**GUI COSTIN:** Well, I've gotten really into these longevity podcasters, Dr. Hyman and Attia and Huberman. I'm 58 we're getting just, all the stuff they talk about, it debunks so many sort of myths. And it makes you a little sad. But it's really those. They're really fascinating and they're funny and they're really educational. And it's been great because I tend



to work out every morning. And I just put on one of those podcasts. And so I get a lot of time in on the podcast just during a workout. And it's really fun.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** That's great. All right. Well, Gui, this has been wonderful. Why don't you wrap it up? Anything that we may have missed or anything you want to make sure that our listeners take away? And then tell people where to find you. And then also, I know you have a book, so feel free to plug the book.

**GUI COSTIN:** Well, first off, I'd say any of these listeners who are thinking about hiring a culture coach, I would definitely hire these two because they're insane and they get it. Like, you have no idea. So that's first and foremost, don't worry about me. Just hire them and then we'll have a successful podcast. And yeah, you can find me at [GuiCostin.com](http://GuiCostin.com). Or if you want a signed copy of my book, just email me at [gui@dakota.com](mailto:gui@dakota.com) and I'll send you a signed copy. So we'd love to send anyone who wants one.

**ANNE CANDIDO:** Oh, that's wonderful. And with that, we encourage you to take at least one powerful insight you've heard and put it into practice. Remember, strategic counsel is only effective if you put it into action. Did we spark something with this episode that you want to talk about further? Reach out to us through our website, [ForthRightPeople.com](http://ForthRightPeople.com). We can help you customize what you have heard to move your business. And make sure to follow or subscribe to Strategic Counsel on your favorite podcast platform.