

Announcer:

The Art of Leadership Network.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Welcome to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. It's so good to have you here. It's Carey here. This is episode 522, where we sit down and have a conversation with Dallas Maverick CEO Cynt Marshall. Today's episode is brought to you by Compassion. You can meet a practical need for a child in poverty this holiday season by going to compassion.com/givingtree/carey, C-A-R-E-Y. And by BELAY. For years, BELAY helped me accomplish more, juggle less, and get back to growing my company with a virtual assistant. And they want to help you too. Just text my name Carey, C-A-R-E-Y, to 55123 and get back to growing your organization with BELAY.

Well, Cynt Marshall was recommended to me by a couple of friends, and we talk about becoming CEO of the Dallas Mavericks, how to reverse, if you read Sports Illustrated or any news organization really, it was a big story back in 2018, about the toxic culture at the Dallas Mavericks and how she came in and how she reversed that. And then also we talk about what she's learning from Mark Cuban and what he has learned from her. Cynt is the CEO of the Dallas Maverick. She's president and CEO of Marshalling Resources Consulting and the former senior vice president of human resources and chief diversity officer for AT&T.

She is the first African American woman to hold the CEO role for any NBA team and was named one of the 30 Most Powerful Women in Sports by Adweek and one of the 50 Most Powerful Women in Corporate America by Black Enterprise Magazine, and one of 15 of the World's Most Inspiring Leaders by Forbes. She is an outspoken cancer survivor, we touch on that briefly, and a regular speaker at cancer related events. She lives in the Dallas area, and man, this is a great conversation. Cynt is an absolute dynamo and we had a lot of fun. Hey, we want to thank our partners for this too.

I know whatever you're doing today, whether you are riding your bike, as I might be when this episode airs, or whether you're in your car, whether you are cooking dinner, whether you're working out of the gym, whatever you're doing, this gets brought to you because me and my team gets supported by our partners. Pay attention. These are organizations we vet and we trust and we hope you will too, and one of them is Compassion. I love Compassion. Our church has partnered with them for years and so have my wife and I. We've seen how it helps our congregation focus on others and engage globally in tangible ways.

Maybe you don't know that in all 26 countries where Compassion works, they partner exclusively with local churches to release children from poverty in Jesus' name. The local church is a hero. I've seen this on the ground on multiple trips with Compassion. And as your church begins preparing for the holiday season and encouraging generosity, Compassion has a really cool opportunity called the Giving Tree. It's simple way for your church to share the love of Jesus with children in need.

All you do is you put a Christmas tree up in the lobby or wherever, maybe at multiple lobbies, multiple locations, and you put ornaments on that represent a variety of gift options. Each gift meets a specific practical need for a child in poverty and the whole church helps out. Check it out and sign up at compassion.com/givingtree/carey. I'll say that one more time, compassion.com/givingtree/C-A-R-E-Y. You can request a free ornament kit from their website, set it up in your church, and away you go. You're changing lives. Sometimes as leaders, we think there is no way someone could do the job as well as we can.

I've suffered from that in my young leader days. It's easy to feel you got your hands tied. You can't focus on time off. You can't focus on the important things, like maybe your message. The truth is, that's not

true. I got a lot better when I started empowering my team. And with BELAY, they are a great organization, I think the premier virtual assistant organization in America, and I've hired multiple team members from BELAY. They have helped me accomplish more, juggle less, and get back to doing only what I could do, which is like doing interviews like this, right? With BELAY, there's no stack of resumes in front of me.

There were no months of waiting. When I needed someone, I just contacted BELAY. They had someone literally, well, sooner than I could actually start a search. A qualified person ready to go, matched to your team and to you, as a leader. If you're interested, check out BELAY. Their modern staffing solutions have been helping busy leaders like me delegate tasks like sermon preparation, volunteer coordination, and supporting new members. Basically they are a go-to solution for busy leader. As an exclusive for our listeners, BELAY has a VIP offer. To claim it, text, Carey, my name, C-A-R-E-Y, to 55123.

Get the support you need to get out of the detail weeds and get back to growing your church or business with BELAY. Once again, that's Carey to 55123. And now with all that said, let's dive into a fascinating conversation with Cynt Marshall. Cynt, welcome to the podcast.

Cynt Marshall:

Thank you. It's so good to be here. It's good to see you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's great to see you too. We're going to talk about leadership. We're going to talk about your role at the Mavericks, AT&T, the whole deal, but I want to start at the beginning. You have a really dramatic story, and I'd love to start with your childhood. It was not an easy upbringing from everything that I've read and your path to leadership wasn't paved. It was a dirt road. It was a gravel path.

Cynt Marshall:

That's true.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Do you want to talk about your childhood, Cynt?

Cynt Marshall:

That's true. It wasn't easy. Probably easier for me than for my mother. My parents left Birmingham, Alabama when I was a baby, so three months old. They didn't want their kids to grow up in the Jim Crow segregated South, so they followed an aunt and uncle to the San Francisco Bay Area. I grew up in Richmond, California in the Easter Hill public housing projects. Some of the things that you normally hear about, some of the bad things that you normally hear about in a housing project, we experienced that. We experienced, my mom did, domestic violence that carried over to us.

When I was 11 years old, I actually saw my father shoot a man in the head and actually in self-defense, in defense of me, because all this commotion was happening at our door. A 17 year old young man who we knew in the neighborhood, we went to church with him, came over to have some kind of confrontation with my dad. My mom had all six of her kids in the back room. I was this kind of nosy kid. I was quiet, believe it or not. I just kind of sit with my math book and my Bible. I always joke about my mom putting two books in my hand at an early age, a math book in one hand and a Bible in the other.

I just kept my head in my book. I was kind of quiet, but I was inquisitive. I heard all this commotion at the front door, and I went to the front door to see what was going on. And that was when my father realized that I was no longer in the back room with my five brothers and sisters where my mom had taken us all to when this broke out, but I was in the potential pathway of a bullet. The young man pointed his silver pistol, I can still see it, down to my father's right side where I was standing. My father shot back in defense of me actually. Fortunately, it wasn't fatal, but you can imagine all the chaos that broke out in our family.

My father didn't have to do jail time or anything like that. I mean, he went overnight, but came back. But it was chaotic for us. I mean, literally chaos broke out in our neighborhood. I'll never forget, we all had to be sequestered in the house for safety purposes. I wanted to go to school. I didn't want to be in the house. I was in the seventh grade and my mom figured out a way for me to go to school, because I was just so upset that I had to stay home. I figured out later in years that school for me was probably a refuge and a chance to just escape some of the bad things. I mean, there were good things that happened too.

I mean, my mom is just a wonderful woman and just had us focus on activities and school. Even with stuff going on in our neighborhood, we had good things going on in our house when my father wasn't doing his stuff. But I love school. I love school, and that was put into me very early to love school and to have it as a place where you could have good things happen. I wanted to go to school. Carey, do you know my mother figured out a way for me to get to school? She had a uniformed police officer, Officer Darrell Prater, he took me to school the rest of that school year. He picked me up in his police car and take me in his police car, or he would ride the bus with me.

I wasn't ashamed by it. I was 11 years old. He did what his car said, protect and to serve. He got me to school every day. These teachers just opened up the world to me. Four years later, my parents divorced. It was a very ugly, violent divorce where we had to flee our house kind of for safety purposes. My mother's prayer, My mother is a praying woman, and her prayer was that she and her, it was three of us at home at that time, that we'd make it back home before school started. Because once again, education was everything. We came back home. My father had taken everything except a mattress for me and my younger sister to sleep on.

We had this four bedroom deluxe unit in the projects and he had taken everything. Eventually some of the stuff showed up, he brought it back, but we didn't have clothes to go to school. I was a junior in high school, and it was also the summer my father broke my nose because I got in the middle of a fight that he and my mom were having that summer when they divorced. Her prayer was that we'd make it back home, and we did. All the stuff is missing. I'll never forget my mother, because we were all upset, "Where are our trophies?" Because I ran track. "Where are the trophies? Where's the stuff? How are we going to go to school? We don't have clothes."

My mother says, "Everybody be quiet," and it was just quiet. She said, "All I want is peace of mind. God will provide." And he did. She told us to focus. I went back to school as a junior in high school, head cheerleader, big silver brace on my nose. My mother just said, "The Lord will take care of it." And he did. He did. Three teachers and a principal embraced me. They knew my mom. They knew she had a desire for her kids to all go to college, and they just got me involved in all kind of activities, my mom had me in stuff, and I ended up graduating at the top of my school district and got five full scholarships to the college of my choice and chose the University of California at Berkeley.

Not because it's the number one public institution in the world, but because it was close to home. It was close to home and stuff was still going on with my dad, so I still wanted to be there. But the Lord just showed up like my mom said he would. I worked hard and I got blessed to get a great education, and

then start my career four years later after I started college with AT&T. I actually describe my childhood as being pretty good, but we had stuff that happened and everybody has stuff that happens. Everybody.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Everybody has stuff that happens, but watching someone be shot and being victim of domestic violence, that's not easy. But it's interesting, Cynt, you had a little bit of a character test that was unplanned. This is my first time meeting you. But there was a problem with the first computer you were hooked up to. It was about 10, 15 minutes before we got rolling, which is fine, but one of the things I really noticed about you is everybody handles stress differently. You had such a calm disposition. You're kind of laughing and joking about it. You didn't get frazzled. You're like, "All right, I'm going to just get..."

And your assistant is in another office, so she can't be with you. You're like, "I'm going to go get my personal computer. We'll boot that up." You're trying to figure out how to get the mic to be recognized and the whole deal, and you're just smiling the whole time. I'm like, "Boy, there's a lot of people..." Something happened along the way that transformed that pain into something else, because there are people with way less. I don't know that I would pass that test, to be honest with you. I didn't get hit as a kid.

Cynt Marshall:

But you had a lot to do with how I responded though, because you were...

Carey Nieuwhof:

What was that?

Cynt Marshall:

You were so calm. You were like, "Okay." When I said maybe I'll need to go get my personal computer, you didn't say, "Well, we're short on time because we're already running late, and we'll just try to see if we can make this work." You said, "Okay, we got time." Because that's probably at the point where I would've gotten a little bit stressed. If you would've given me some kind of energy like, "Woman, you need to hurry up. Okay?" But you did not. But you did not. I felt comfortable just doing what I needed to do, but I also knew I had a backup plan. I knew I had backup. I knew I had backup.

I try not to get too stressed out over stuff. I've seen stress in my life. I've seen stuff that's a matter of life or death. I mean, I apologize for keeping you waiting and you just didn't make a big deal out of it. You were so accommodating, so that just made me okay with it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I'm honored to be with you today. And you know what? Isn't that the gift of margin? We book an hour 90 minutes for these interviews, but then I book another half hour on the end where I'm doing nothing. It's like if the worst happens, and I've got backups for my backup. If I'm running around like a chicken with my head cut off, that's a different story too. Well, thank you. I appreciate that. Apparently we have mutual friends, so some of them weighed in on these questions, basketball friends and church friends. A friend told me to ask you about meeting your husband. He said it's a great story. I don't know anything about that, so go ahead and tell me. You're laughing.

Cynt Marshall:

I met my husband when I was a junior in high school and we were at schools three hours apart, right? I had my local friend at school, but then I met this guy in this club DECA, Distributive Education Clubs of America, but it's three hours away, so didn't see him a whole lot. And then when I started college, my first week in college, and he was a year ahead of me, he called to tell me that he had transferred schools. He had left Fresno City College and transferred to San Francisco State University. He just called one day, my first week in college, and said, "Surprise! I'm across the bridge. I'm at San Francisco State now."

I have moved to the Bay Area, so I could be right across the bridge so I could be close to you." This is my first week in college. I said, "Well, hold up, boyfriend. I mean, surprise. I will call you the day I graduate." And I meant it. He was stunned. Okay? He was stunned. I never forget what I told him. I said, "I don't have time for some smooth talking cutie who wants to play when I need to study. That I am about just getting this good education." My husband says I pretty much told him that it was about school and Jesus. He said that's pretty much in a nutshell what I told him. I said, "I got to be focused."

This is a big deal. I'm going to be the first one in my family going to graduate from a big college. I am serious and I got to focus." I told him I'd call him when I graduate. I only saw him once after that. He'd go by and see my mom, but I was focused. I mean, I had fun in college. I did my thing, but I was not hanging around with him. And then the day I graduated from college, I called him and I said, "Hey, Kenny, this is Cynt." And he said, "Cynt who?" I said, "Boy, don't act like you don't know who I am." He really tried to act like he didn't know who I was. He said, "I haven't talked to you in almost four years." I said, "I know," and I was all excited.

I said, "I just graduated today." I graduated at 2:00 I called him at 3:00. I mean, it's one hour, okay? I said, "You know what? I'm getting ready to start working for the phone company." I was telling him about the job I had. I was going to start in three weeks. I said, "My mom's having me a party at 6:00. She's still in the project. She's working hard. I'm going to work hard. I'm going to help her get out. You know where she is." I was just fired up about life. I said, "I'm still going to church." I mean, I was just going crazy. And he says, "I'm engaged." He said he couldn't come to the party. I said, "No. The party's at 6:00. Come by yourself."

He goes, "No, I'm engaged." Well, that's the wrong answer. I said, "I told you I was going to call you. I just graduated an hour ago." Bottom line, he came to the party at 6:00 and the rest is history. We've been married 39 years. It'll be 40 years next to April 30th. I asked him one time, and I only asked him this because somebody asked me whatever happened to the woman. He said when he hung up the phone, she says, "That's your girlfriend from high school." And just the way he was looking and talking, she says, "You need to go to that graduation party." He knew. He knew.

He had always told my mom that I was going to be his wife, because he just said... His mom was a church lady and all that and he said, "That's just going to be my wife. I can just tell."

Carey Nieuwhof:

I wasn't expecting that. That is a great story.

Cynt Marshall:

Well, I tell that story to kids at commencements as like, "You know what? Put them on hold." When we moved our kids into college, and then my nieces and nephews, my husband is the one who always says, "Is there a phone call you need to make now that you started college? Is there somebody you need to tell them you'll call them when you graduate?" We all laugh about it, but I did put them on hold.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That is fantastic. Let's go to AT&T. You got hired by the phone company. Where do you start? Because you had quite the career. I mean, now CEO of the Dallas Mavericks. We'll figure that part out a little bit later in the conversation. One of the accounts I read is that a lot of the promotion happened a little bit later. It wasn't like in your twenties, it was straight to the top. Can you describe your professional journey so far, Cynt?

Cynt Marshall:

Yes. I had 15 different jobs at AT&T, so 13,088, because I'm a big numbers, I'm a math geek, right? I started out 21 years old supervising operators. I remember telling the recruiter, I said, "I just want a job where I can lead people. I want to be a supervisor. I want to be the boss, and I need to make some money because I'm on this mission here to help my family get out of poverty." I remember I had 13 job offers and I said I'm going to take the one that offers me the most money and the opportunity to be the boss, which sounded crazy, right?

But that's what I did. It turned out to be AT&T and it was a great choice. I started out supervising and it was back in the day, so I don't know if you remember this, you may not be old enough, when we had long-distance operators.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh yeah. I remember long-distance operators, making that phone call home. Are you kidding me?

Cynt Marshall:

You have the 411.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Collect. Collect. I got no money, mom and dad. You're paying for this.

Cynt Marshall:

That's it. Those are the operators that I supervised. It was great too, because I'm 21 years old. I had the night shift, so most of them were these short evening operators, so they worked six hours, but they got paid eight. They were for the most part in their fifties and sixties. They're wonderful. I just started out basically saying, "I don't know anything about this business, but I am here to serve you and I'm here to make your life better. I need to learn this job and you just need to let me know how you need my help." We had a wonderful job. I got along well.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How did you know how to do that? That is not a normal starting point.

Cynt Marshall:

Because at 21 years old, in all due respect to our 21 year olds, what do you really know when you go to work in a company? Now, I knew how to lead. I had been involved in all kind of activities. I knew how to get stuff done and all that, but what do you really know about that new company? Well, I knew what I didn't know, but I also knew what I knew, and I knew how to serve people. I knew how to love up on people. I mean, you love people the way Christ loved the church. I just knew how to do that. I shared

that with them, and I shared what I was about and all that. They loved me and I loved them, and we got so much stuff done.

Mostly ladies, couple of men, they would tell me things they would want me to get done and new practices they would want to put in place. And then I talked to my bosses and they'd say, "No, we can't do that because that's going to mess up everything. That's going to ruin the results." And then they'd work on me some more and I'd go and convince my bosses, "Just let me try it." And then we try stuff and end up having the best results in the area and all that. I learned a long time ago how to listen to employees. In fact, I practiced something called three L's of leadership. If I'm going to be an effective leader, I just need to really perfect three things.

I need to listen to the people, learn from the people, and love the people. If I can do those three things very well, I'll be okay. I really listened to them, and I learned a lot from them. We took a lot of our bold steps. I was 21 years old, nothing to lose. We take bold steps and those things just always worked out for me. And then I ended up getting offered my boss' job. I didn't want to take that. I said, "I want to learn more about the business, learn more." These operators were telling me, "This is a big business. Don't stay here. Go and learn about the business, because one day you could be way up there and you need to know this business."

I said okay, so then I went to the network engineering department and learned all about that. I turned down four promotions overall in my total career, and it was because there was either just something I wanted to know or just the Lord was moving me in another direction. It wasn't really scripted, even though I came in on a fast track management program, but it was almost textbook. I end up learning about our business. I learned about people. When it was really time for the promotion, I'd always have a mentor, somebody says, "Okay, you have to take this next step. Even if you don't know this, you don't know this area, you got to take it."

I ended up working all over our business, line staff, technical, non-technical, public policy, human resources, operations. I just ended up in all the right places. Every time I got a job in all these 15 different jobs, literally from the time I started with the company, I asked two questions. I think about it often, because for 36 years, I'd ask that question. "Lord, what is it that you would have me to do?" Because my mom always taught me that you show up to a job, there's something that you are supposed to do. There's something that you are uniquely qualified to bring. Everybody has a role to play and you have to play that role.

I was taught that. I asked the Lord, "What is it that you would have me to do? What do I really need to get done here? And then who is it that you will have me touch?" Because I'm there for a reason. He would reveal it every time and I'd do what I needed to do and carry out the mission, and then go and do something else. It just all worked out. It covered three different states, California, North Carolina, and Texas. It worked out.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I want a time hop a little bit then on that note and go to five years ago. You're wrapping up AT&T. According to what I've read, you're thinking about stepping back. You're like, "You know what? I'll do something else with my life. I'm kind of done the corporate scene." You get a phone call. Is that right? How did that work?

Cynt Marshall:

That is correct. I retired in May of 2017 after 36 years, had been in Dallas four years helping our chairman and our officer team kind of transform the culture of the company. We had had 10 mergers or

something. Our CEO, our chairman Randall Stephenson really was focused on the culture and creating a great place to work. I was tapped to be able to come and help with that effort when I left North Carolina. After we did all that, retired in May of 2017. I basically said I was going to take a year off. To your point, I said, "Okay, Lord, what direction are you sending me in?" It's not going to be corporate.

College people were calling me about being a college president, running nonprofits. I was just all about serving. I'm like, "Okay, what am I going to do next?" I started a consulting company because the chairman of Dow Chemical decided he wanted me to help them transform their culture. Similar work that I had just done AT&T. I ended up taking just that summer off to get my one daughter out of high school and one out of college. And then I said, "Okay. That's what I'm going to do. I'll do the consulting thing." I did that in August, and then the following February 21st, so I hadn't even been retired a whole year, is when I get this call. I remember this day like it was yesterday.

You can appreciate this because it was February 21st, 2018. When I woke up that morning, these teenagers were protesting in Parkland, Florida about gun violence because of what had happened at their school. It was also the day that Reverend Dr. Billy Graham had passed away. I remember that morning, I'm sure you remember that morning, and I was thinking about how both of these things were really impacting me because... I mean, I'm looking at these teenagers, and then I'm looking at the impact of this 99 year old and the impact he had on my life. I mean, one of my fondest memories in North Carolina is when I was able to bring my mom out when they opened up the Billy Graham Library in Charlotte.

Because he was such an integral part of my family's story when my mother was going through a lot, but she always found refuge, of course, in her faith and in the scriptures. If Reverend Dr. Billy Graham came to Oakland or the San Francisco area, she had to figure out a way for us to get there. When I heard that news that morning, I was just impacted by it. I ended up writing a blog called Impact and posted it about what was the impact. Here I found myself age-wise smack dabbed in the middle. Teenagers, 99 year old, I'm smack dabbed in the middle. What's the impact? I mean, I know what impact that I had at AT&T, but what's next?

I posted my blog. It was one of the rare weeks I was working at home and I was talking to my clients. I was on the phone with the folks at Dow. And all of a sudden... I was on the house phone and my cell phone started going off, just text messages. Carey, I have four kids, so I actually thought it was one of my kids asking for money. I never looked at the text messages. I gave my husband the phone and I said, "One of the kids need money. Take care of it." He brought me the phone back a few minutes later and he said, "This guy doesn't need your money." I said, "What?" And he said, "Mark Cuban is trying to reach you."

Please do not judge me. I didn't know Mark Cuban. I never heard of Mark Cuban. People laugh and say, "You never heard of Mark Cuban?" I said, "Well, he never heard of me." Somebody mentioned my name to him, a few somebodies I guess, mentioned my name to him and his staff that day when the crisis was happening at the Mavs, and so he reached out to me. I finally called him back. I'd tell my client to hang up. My husband called my son to convince me to call him back. I finally called him back and he asked me if I could come and meet with him. He was so sincere, so genuine. Told me he got my name from a few people and wanted to know if I could come and meet with him in his office at 2:00.

I told him I could not come and meet with him. I had a mammogram scheduled. I told him I'm a cancer survivor. I'm actually a colon cancer survivor. I said, "But I know firsthand what happens when you put off your medical appointments. I learned that the hard way. I have to keep this appointment, but I'll come and see you later that day." Went to see him. Read about the article on the way. Got there. It was storming. I just thought, "Based on what I read, I'm not going to do this."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Was that the Sports Illustrated piece?

Cynt Marshall:

Yes, it was the Sports Illustrated. I said, "If this is all true, I just don't think I'm up for this. I don't think this is the place for me." I said, "But you know what? I'm here." My husband was all decked out on all his Mavs colors and all that. My husband is not a fashion guy, but he was into it. "Put the right colors on. Don't go in there with that kale Berkeley blue. Take that Golden State Warrior stuff off. This is the Dallas Mavericks." I was ready. I went in there color coded and everything. This woman, the receptionist Nancy, gave me a big hug when I walked in, or maybe I gave her the big hug. And then I gave Mark a big hug.

My husband was trying to come in with me. I told him to sit down. I went back and sat with him, and it was a 55 minute conversation. It was beautiful. It was so genuine, so transparent. He just basically asked me if I could help him and if I would be his CEO, chairman of the board, pick the title, that he needed help. He wanted to transform the culture and things were kind of coming out and stories were unfolding. He was basically crushed and said, "I need your help." We went through a lot. I ended up telling him, I said, "Okay. I need to go home and pray about this." He says, "Tell me what that looks like."

I described my little prayer closet. I described my prayer closet and I said, "I really have to go in and treat the Lord on this," because I mean, it's not something that was in my plan. I don't really know what's going on here. It started coming to me that I was uniquely qualified to do this. And then he says, "Yes, I think you could really have an impact on us." I thought about that on the way home, and then I thought, impact, I had just written a blog that morning and posted it about impact. It was just like boom. I said, "Oh my goodness." Came home and prayed about it. Went back in there the next day.

Before I could even go and tell Mark I was there and to talk to him about it, some people grabbed me and took me in the conference room. I was in the building for three hours before Mark even knew I was there, because I guess I was just meant to be there. It's been four and a half years. I say we because Cynt is not the person who made the Dallas Mavericks better from a culture standpoint. There are whole group of us, the whole team of people in that building, in that organization, even our external advisory council folks helping us become a great place to work. We're on a journey.

I'd say we've gone from not a good place to work to a very good place to work, and we are on a journey to be a great place to work. It was divine for sure. It was divine.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, one of my question feeders knew exactly what was going on at the Dallas Mavericks being in pro sports. For those who may not know, I read the Sports Illustrated article. Just give us an indication of what you were walking into in 2018.

Cynt Marshall:

I was walking into a place that was not friendly to women. To put it mildly, not friendly to women. There was a 19 or so year history of sexual harassment, misconduct, inappropriate behavior, just bad stuff, unethical stuff going on in the organization on the business side. Not on the basketball side, but on the business side at the hands of top leadership. Things were being covered up. It was horrible. Sports Illustrated had their own description for it, but I will tell you, I walked into a place that was not friendly to women and frankly didn't really value the presence of people of color at the lower level.

It was not a diverse organization. When I walked into my first meeting, there were 10 white men at the table, and then they brought in two women who were not in permanent leadership positions. I don't know if that was trying to fake me out, I don't know what that was all about, but I discovered very quickly that they had no women or people of color at the table in permanent leadership positions. It was a very strange place, a very different place than what I had grown accustomed to. The Lord blessed me to put a hundred day plan in place.

I didn't think that we were going to have to necessarily act on all these initiatives that I had laid out because I figured good performance management system, market-based compensation, all that kind of stuff existed as well, and so maybe the problems were just isolated to sexual harassment, which is horrible in and of itself. But the problems were even bigger than that. It was not functioning, in my opinion, lack of business. Mark had his focus on the basketball side and things just weren't happening on the business side, in my opinion, to really serve the people, wonderful people who chose a career in sports.

They were not getting served the way I felt they needed to get served. That's what I've been about for the past four and a half years. We laid out a vision that said we would set the global standard in the NBA for diversity and inclusion, and I chose that because there's some bottom line impacts to that. If you do it right, you'll win the war for talent. You'll serve your customers. You'll be able to reach out to the community. If you get all that right, your business will be profitable. And then I said, "We will operate from a set of values. We will have values-based employment." The values spell CRAFTS.

They're all based on scripture, character, respect, authenticity, fairness, teamwork, and safety, both physical and emotional safety. Our workplace promise is every voice matters and everybody belongs. Those were the things we laid out. I had one-on-ones with every single employee in the organization to just learn about them as people, learn about the vision they have for their lives personally and professionally, because my job as a leader is to serve them and make sure they can kind of realize those visions. And then we just said, "Okay, what's the plan?" We got everybody rallied around.

Brought in some people. Had to pretty much let that leadership team go. I think there's one person at my table now who was a part of that original team. We have 50% women at the table, 50% people of color. We have employee resource groups. I mean, you just name it. I met with our Mavs Inclusion Council earlier today because we're still on a journey to be a great place to work. I mean, we still have some work to do in some areas, but it is a different place than I walked into, and that's by the standards of the employees. We all did it together. Cynt cannot get the credit. We all did it together.

Carey Nieuwhof:

There was a little bit of a big turnover at the top and I can understand why. What was the reaction of the employees who stayed?

Cynt Marshall:

Okay, I'll give you a couple of examples. One employee came to me one day to let me know that he was really concerned that his group was not really responding and he felt like this positive wave was going on. We were all rallied around these 200 initiatives in this a hundred day plan, but his group wasn't really a part of that because his boss had told them not to respond to anything we were doing because I was going to be gone in 90 days because it was a big PR stunt. I didn't know basketball, I didn't know the business of basketball, and that part was true. Just don't worry about it and just wait it out, which is just really unfortunate.

I mean, I was here more than 90 days. He's not here, but I'm still here. I had to address that. The reason I say that, the employee wanted to be a part of what was going on. They saw the value in what we were all doing together. I remember it was one termination that we had to make that was... That's the hardest part of my job as a leader. That's the only thing that, I mean really, really would make me cry as a leader and my whole career is having to let somebody go. I always say, "I've never fired anybody. People fired themselves. They fired themselves by their own actions and behaviors and all that."

But as a leader, sometimes you have to be the one to bring that to their attention and then to walk them to the door. I remember just really upset about it one day and one employee came in my office and he was sobbing. I mean, sobbing, a very senior employee. His response was, he said, "Thanks for cutting off the head of the snake." I'll never forget it, Carey. I said, "What?" He was sobbing, and then he told me story after story after story of frankly what was pretty much mental and emotional abuse of what they had gone through. He said, "We can live now. We can come to work now and be okay."

He was sobbing. I had no idea that that was going to be the impact of that particular termination. I mean, I just did what we needed to do because of some things that had been uncovered in the investigation, but I didn't know it went that deep. The employees all rallied around. I mean, there were some. There's some people who resist change. We still have a few employees in the organization right now that want their old bosses back because they were close to their old bosses. I know what those pockets are. I know where they are. We love those people too. But Mark Cuban needed to make a change.

He made that change, and we needed to make some more changes. And we did. And we did. Very, very few people, very few resisted it. They wanted it. They wanted it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, with the few remaining minutes we have, I just have a couple of other questions for you, Cynt. One is you weren't really a basketball fan, were you? Or maybe a fan, but this is not like, "Oh, great! I've been poised for this moment. And now I finally get to be the CEO of a basketball team." No, no?

Cynt Marshall:

No, I was a fan. I had another team.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You were a fan.

Cynt Marshall:

In fact, I was actually wearing the sweats of that team when Mark called me. I had another team, my hometown team growing up, right? I hadn't even been to a Dallas Maverick's game. I mean, my kids would come into town. Every now and then my chairman would give us some tickets, so I'd tell them they could go if they were on spring break or something. But I was just diehard with other team, but I love sports. I loved basketball and I love football. I mean, I'm a big sports person, which I was just so surprised that I had never heard of Mark because I am a big sports person, but I was not a Mavs person. When I got there, I knew how to lead people, but I did not know the business of basketball.

That's one thing Mark told me in our very first meeting that he would teach me the business of basketball and others would teach me the business of basketball. Something that was so heartwarming is that when my appointment to the position was announced, I had colleagues... There are 30 of us, right? I had colleagues from around the country literally sending me emails. I didn't even know my email

was set up yet. I mean, they were reaching out as such a good group of people. They wanted me to be successful and they started off from day one teaching me the business of basketball. Like my buddy, Pete Fagan, they came in to see me.

They would come into town to see me and sit down with their teams, my team. They wanted me to know the business of basketball. They were all in, wanted me to be successful, and my team members were the same way. Now I have learned a little bit about the business of basketball four and a half years in. I know a little bit about the business of basketball and my boss continues to help every day. Between all of my colleagues and all the people in our organization and others trying to help me, I've learned the business of basketball.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But that goes back to 21 years old, you show up AT&T in charge of the overnight operators, when there was such a thing, and you're like, if I got this right, listen, learn, love, the three L's of leadership. Took you all the way to the top of a massive organization. Real quick, last question, tell us about your book and where people can find you, but what are you learning from Mark and what is he learning from you?

Cynt Marshall:

Okay, so I am learning from Mark how to just be open to ideas, how to be innovative, not to be married to anything that already exists, that there's always a different way to do things. Sometimes you have to just change with the times. The audiences change, the things happen in the world that we have to pay attention to, and we've got to be agile. We've got to be able to pivot on a dime, and we learned that during COVID, and be open to new things. If they don't work out, just go ahead and admit that. I mean, we don't even call it failure. It's like, "Okay, that didn't work. There's something else we're supposed to be doing."

His attitude about that when things don't go well has been mind-blowing to me. He's like, "Okay, so we're going to start something." Or sometime he'll say, "Let's try this," and then he goes, "Okay, well that didn't work, so we're going to try something else." I'm like, whoa! I mean, just that fast. It's just a great lesson in life because things do happen. I have a saying that I always say, "Sometimes the light at the end of the tunnel is a train." Sometimes bad things do happen to good people. Sometimes bad things happen in the workplace, sometimes things just don't work out, but you got to keep it moving.

I mean, you got to keep it moving. He is the keep it moving guy, and he's smart as I get out. He's brilliant. Sometime I just want to get in that brain and just pick it, which is awesome. He's available. And for somebody as busy as he is, he responds within seconds to emails or a text message. I could text my boss right now and he'd call me and say, "You okay? What's going on?" As busy as he is. That's crazy to me, so I'm always kind of blown away by that. Blown away by that. And then I think what he's learning from me, here's what I've heard him say publicly, that he is learning the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and that people bring different things.

It's not a cookie cutter approach. He's really learned about equity and the difference between equity and equality and sameness does not equal fairness, and how to meet people where they are. He's learned the difference between diversity and inclusion. It's just not having somebody at the table, but you have to teach them the culture and bring them in. It's a way to include people. He's learning that, again, it's not just about equality. I'm glad he's learned those. He says he's learned those kind of things from me, so I believe what he says.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, your book is out by the time this airs. Tell us about it and congratulations.

Cynt Marshall:

Thank you. It is my first book. It's my first book and it's called You've Been Chosen: Thriving Through the Unexpected. It started out as the story of my cancer journey, because I did a CaringBridge blog post. Every round of chemo that I had, I would post I'd do a posting and talk about what was going on with me, the good, the bad, the great, and the ugly. It was primarily because so many people were calling, and so it was a way to keep them informed. Well, over the past 10 years, I've gotten hundreds of calls asking for that journal because people either are going through their own cancer journey and they want to read that story, and then they'll read something in round three and says, "Oh, that's happening to me. Okay, that's okay," or people who are coming alongside them.

It was supposed to be just to get that in the hands of people because somebody said, "Cynt, you need to turn this into a book." Well, actually what it's turned into now is... Because of the publishers and interviewing me, they said, "You were equipped." It's kind of like the observation you made about how I handled stress. They said, "Something happened a long time ago for you to have handled cancer the way you did. We want to understand that. Throughout your cancer journal, you talk about being chosen for this and the Lord had chosen you for that. You've been chosen for a whole lot of things.

You were chosen even before the cancer battle. We want to tell that story." It talks about the different ways that the Lord and good people always showed up in my life. The Lord chose me to go through different things and he chooses all of us to go through different types of adversity, but he chooses us based on the fact that he has equipped us to handle these things. And then he chooses up to show up for other people when they are going through things. There is a way to thrive through the unexpected. Things just happen and they just come up. But every time something happens like that, we've been divinely chosen to go through it.

We've also been chosen to help other people go through it. That's what the book is about. My prayer is that it would just bless somebody. If it just touches one person and gives them hope and increases their faith that they've been chosen for the battle and that the Lord will show up and he will have great people show up in their lives to help them get through it, then it was worth writing it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, Cynt the Sprint, if you read the book, you'll know about that, I was forewarned that this was going to be an epic interview and they undersold it. This has been an absolute delight.

Cynt Marshall:

Thank you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Just thank you for the joy. Thanks for the openness. Thanks for the humility. Thanks for the delight. I am going to continue to track with you, and perhaps at some point we'll get a round two. I have more questions unasked than asked. This is fantastic.

Cynt Marshall:

I would love that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Cynt, thank you. That would be great.

Cynt Marshall:

When you read the book, you'll want to talk to me about my four adopted kids and the death of my daughter and just all kind of stuff. You'll want to talk about it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

All the stuff we didn't get to today.

Cynt Marshall:

We'll get to it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You bet. We will. Cynt, I want to thank you so much and God bless you. Thank you.

Cynt Marshall:

God bless you. Thank you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, we have show notes and a lot more from that fascinating and engaging conversation with Cynt Marshall over at CareyNieuwhof.com/episode522. We include transcripts with that, if you're interested in that. I use transcripts all the time on some of my favorite podcasts. You might want to check that out. We want to thank our partners. Thank you so much, BELAY. For years, BELAY has helped me accomplish more, juggle less, and get back to growing my organization with a virtual assistant. Just text Carey, C-A-R-E-Y, to 55123 and get back to growing your organization with BELAY. Christmas is coming. You can work with Compassion.

Get your whole church involved. Set up a Christmas tree and supply a child in need by going to compassion.com/givingtree/carey. That's compassion.com/givingtree/carey. Well, it must be sports month around here, because next up we got Tim Tebow. Tim is a bestselling author, former NFL quarterback, and he talks about, well, we get pretty vulnerable, talk about being cut from the NFL, losing your identity, overcoming bitterness. And then we get into his workout routine and the joys of working in his foundation. It's really interesting. I think we figure out what makes Tim tick. Here is an excerpt.

Tim Tebow:

And that night, I believe I was up for six awards, something like that, and they announced the first award and I lose. They announced the second award, and I lose. I was like, "This stings a little bit." The third award, and I lose. Now I'm starting to get irritated. The fourth award and the fifth award, and I lose you. You see what had happened, Carey, is I so bitter and irritated and upset. For however long before, it was all about me. It was all about my disappointments. It was all about what I didn't accomplish.

It was all about the legacy and all of the things that we lost, right? I lost perspective on ultimately what mattered. My identity wasn't gone in that loss, because for the first time, Carey, and I don't know how long, I wasn't thinking about my myself anymore. The focus wasn't on me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

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That's coming up next time. Also, Christie and Joey Spears, Chad Veach, Sharon Hodde Miller, Brian Koppelman, Jon and McRae Acuff, Nancy Duarte, Lysa TerKeurst, Pat Lencioni, Erwin McManus, James Clear, and a whole lot more. If you subscribe, you will never miss a thing. I only listen to the podcast I subscribe to. Wherever you're listening, Apple Podcast, Spotify, Overcast, which is where I listen to my podcast, just hit subscribe and away you go. Welcome to the growing number of subscribers we see on this show every month, a ton of whom are young leaders. If you like this episode, also leave us a rating and review.

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